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by ISABEL STEWART WAY

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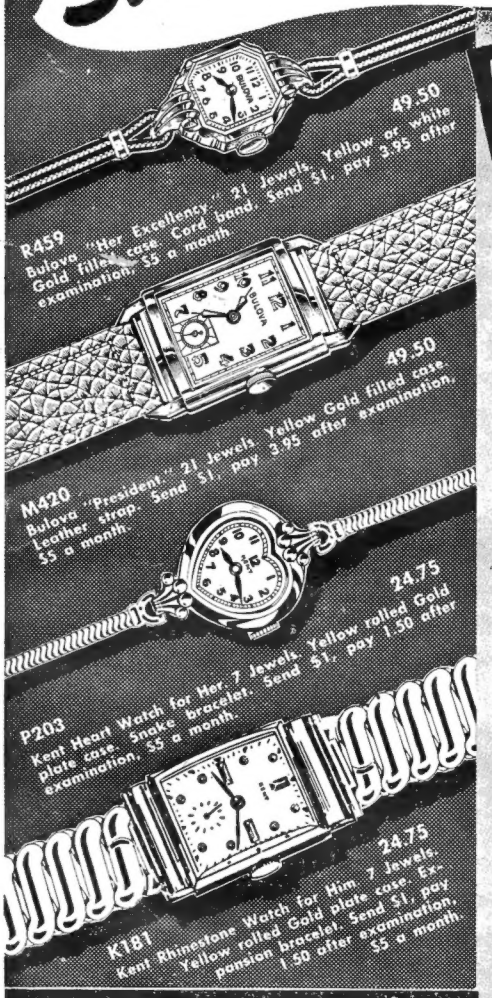

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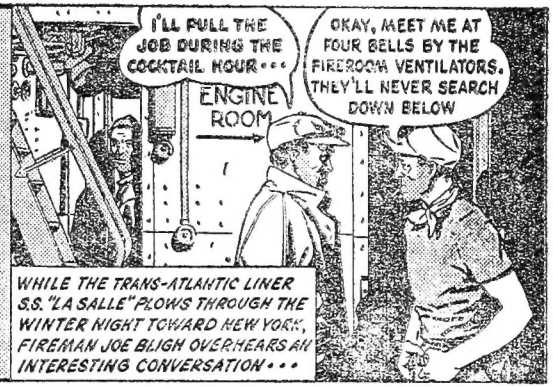
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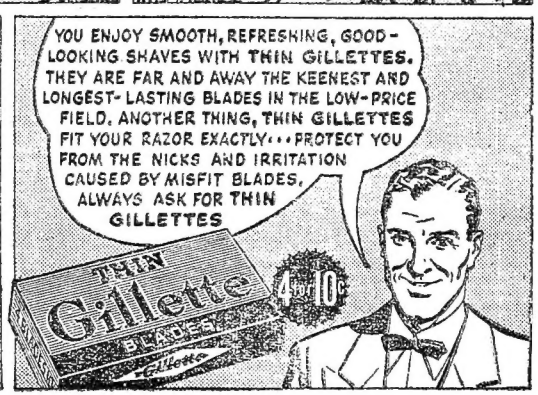
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Romance WESTERN

Vol. 1 JUNE, 1948 No. 2

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SWAN SONG for a

Sing a song of Diantha . . .

A temptress in angel's disguise,

Till she fell in love with
Johnny—

Who had the devil in his eyes!

Thrilling
Romance
Novel

DIANTHA ADJUSTED a stray wisp of golden curl before the wavy mirror, there in the parlor of the small hotel. For a moment, a wicked little dimple played at the corner of her mouth.

"I do look like an angel, sort of," she told herself. "Johnny Wing ought to be very tender with me, if he's half as soft-

WAYWARD ANGEL

by Isabel Stewart Way

Johnny held Diantha tight against him while he lashed out at Zoe. "What do you mean, hitting this poor little thing?"

hearted as his dad says he is. And Pop, the old scalawag, won't mind dying temporarily—for cash and freedom."

There was something ethereal about the girl looking back at Diantha Day from the mirror. She was small and slim, with softly curling hair of pale shining yellow, and with eyes that were very bue, very innocent. There was a fragile delicacy in that lovely face that always made Diantha seem just a little this side of heaven.

That wasn't true. Diantha was far this side of heaven . . . about as far as a girl who's nice, but tough like whang-leather and with the soul of an imp, can get. That was probably just as well, for even a trace of angelic leanings would spoil the job she had to do now.

Diantha had hired herself out to break Johnny Wing's heart and toss it ruthlessly aside.

"The pipsqueak!" Diantha murmured, recalling the picture of Johnny his father had showed her. Stiff shoulders, eyes a little shifty, mouth drawn to a smirk. Only a parent could consider a man like that good-looking—a doting parent like old J. D. Wing.

"Handsome cuss!" J. D. had nodded pridefully, after she'd ventured the truthful remark that Johnny resembled his father. "All the girls go for him, and you can't blame 'em, by golly! Just one big fault Johnny's got—he's too damned soft-hearted. That's how this designin' actress hooked him. Her stock company was left stranded out there, yet my sister Peg says she's stayin' at the hotel and dressin' fit to kill . . . blast her hide!"

BEFORE THE mirror, Diantha shrugged and twisted another small curl over her finger, then let it drop on her white forehead. "I'll make short work of our Johnny," she vowed. "He'll turn from this Zoe Devine and wilt before me, and then I can tie him up with pink ribbon and hand him over to the girl his father has picked out for him. If she can't hang on to him after his heart's been broken, then she deserves to die an old maid. But what any girl can see in *him*—"

She turned from the mirror. A man's voice had split the early evening silence of the sleepy cowtown. "Hi there, Johnny Wing! Don't mean to tell me you're in town again tonight?"

"Big business, fella! Mighty big!" returned a voice that didn't sound like a pipsqueak's at all. It was much too deep and resonant.

Diantha hurried over to the window and peered out through the lace curtains to see the speaker. That man coming up the porch steps . . . She caught her breath. It must be Johnny Wing, all right, but he wasn't the least bit like the picture. Why—he was handsome! Tall and lithe, with shining dark hair and a good-natured grin.

This was going to be a pleasure, Diantha thought. More of a pleasure than she had ever dreamed. But even as she watched, Johnny looked up and waved, and his face lit up as if somebody had flashed a candle before it. The reason was soon apparent.

Zoe Devine's voice came down, low, smooth as rich cream. "I'll be a few minutes, Johnny. Do you mind waiting?"

"Of course, I mind!" Johnny laughed. "But a guy gets used to it. Anyway, I've got a little errand to do." With that, he disappeared into the hotel.

Diantha scurrried over to the farthest, darkest corner and sat down, very primly. Somehow, she felt disturbed at the quickness of her heartbeats; she wasn't used to being frightened. "A cool little devil," Pop always called her, because nothing ever scared her, no matter how unexpected or alarming. And much of the unexpected and alarming had happened in the eighteen years of Diantha's life, brought up, as

she'd been, in one rodeo after another.

She was no cool little devil now. She was feeling as if the greatest moment of her life were just at hand, and when Johnny Wing appeared in the doorway, hat off, a queer warmth, like wine, burned suddenly through all her veins, leaving her breathless.

Johnny peered through the dusk. "Miss Day?" he asked politely. It was the sort of politeness a man displays when he has a task of courtesy to do and wants to get it over with quickly. "Miss Diantha Day?"

The queer breathlessness made Diantha's voice husky as she said, "Yes. Yes, I'm Diantha Day. And you must be Johnny . . . I mean Mr. Wing."

She arose and walked toward him, until she stood in the light of the hallway lamp. There, she lifted her pale, heart-shaped face and made her eyes wide and wistful within their silken smudge of long-lashed loveliness, but the strange trembling of her small body came without any help at all. "I'm glad you're here, Mr. Wing."

She saw him catch his breath. She saw his brown eyes go startled, then pleased, and she saw the quick way his hand reached out to take hers. Johnny was no longer being just polite. He was liking it.

He grinned widely. "The name is Johnny. And welcome to the Flying Wing Ranch, Diantha! I hope you're going to enjoy being with us."

"Oh, I will. But it's been such a long trip . . . and I've been so afraid."

"Afraid?" His hand tightened upon hers. "Why, you're tremblin' right now—and you're such a little thing! Look, there's nothin' to be afraid of, sugar. You're here, safe and sound."

"Oh . . . I know." She let her breath catch. "But all the way out here I've been thinking that—that you might not want me here, and that you and your aunt would hate me for coming, a stranger this way—and . . ." She stopped, and covered her face with those fragile-looking hands that were really strong enough to hold a bucking bronc in line.

She had to pull her hand from Johnny's to do it, but it was a gamble that paid off. For the next instant she was in his arms, her head against his shoulder, and he was stroking her hair and murmuring sweet things.

"Of course, we want you, honey," he told her. "Aunt Peg has talked of nothin' else for a week! Why, she made me promise that I'd get Hank Smolett to bring you out to the Flyin' Wing right away, tonight! It's only twelve miles, Diantha."

She gave a little cry of horror, lifted her head and looked at him. "You mean—ride out twelve miles, at night? With a strange man?"

Johnny said in a troubled voice, "I'm so doggoned sorry, honey, but—well, old Hank's a good driver, and the moon'll be up early. It'll be a real pretty drive."

DIANTHA DROPPED her head to his shoulder again and gave what she hoped would pass for a heartwrenching sob to Johnny's untrained ears. She wailed, "You *don't* want me here! You didn't meet me at the train, and now you're sending me out there with a—a man I don't even know."

"But Hank's about seventy, honey!" Johnny sounded so miserable. "And—well, I should have met you. I'm ashamed of that, Diantha. I just plain loitered along the way, I guess. Doggone it, I've been a regular heel. Poor little girl!"

He bent to kiss her gently, tenderly, as a brother might have done. But when his lips met Diantha's, the gentleness suddenly left. His arms tightened and held her close . . . close . . . until Diantha felt her lips flame to a thousand fires under his kiss.

She forgot that she was supposed to be

a timid angel . . . or even a cool little devil. She forgot everything except the man holding her in his arms, and the glorious tide of ecstasy that was rising in her heart. She forgot that this was all part of a game, and was aware only that it was the realest thing she had ever known in her life.

Johnny lifted his head at last, and spoke in husky bewilderment. "I don't know how that happened, Diantha. I truly don't. I just meant to . . . I don't know what I meant."

Diantha knew how it happened, but she didn't tell. It had been easy, raising her face quickly. Yes, it had been easy, but she wondered now as she stood there, her cheek against Johnny's shoulder, just what she had done.

It was in the deal only that she was to make Johnny love her, then turn him down, so he could be caught on the rebound by another girl—the right one. It was only meant that she was to break Johnny's heart temporarily, not her own. Never her own—for with herself, Diantha suddenly knew, it might be for keeps.

The thought of a broken heart for herself gave Diantha courage to pull away from Johnny, to stand there before him, head bent, hands clasped together. "I'm sorry, Johnny," she whispered. "I don't know what you must think of me."

His hand reached out to touch hers again. "I think you're an angel," he told her, his brown eyes filled with awe.

"I'm ready, Johnny!" The low creamy voice had come from behind them, the same voice Diantha had heard before. Johnny turned, and the awe in his eyes was driven out by the admiration that flamed there.

This, then, was Zoe Devine.

DIANTHA LOOKED at her and understood a lot of things, for Zoe was the loveliest creature she'd ever glimpsed. She was tall, almost as tall as Johnny, with dark luxuriant hair and sloe-colored eyes. Her mouth was as scarlet as wild strawberries, and her well-turned figure did full justice to her sleek-fitting, pale yellow dress. A yellow rose seemed to be blooming in the garden of her dusky hair.

Johnny said huskily, "Zoe, you're beautiful!"

The girl laughed, winked at him, then let her gaze go to Diantha. "So this is the child your aunt is to nurse back to health?" she asked, too sweetly.

"Yes . . . oh, yes! Zoe, this is Diantha Day," Johnny introduced, but he didn't tear his gaze from the actress.

Diantha nodded. Zoe stared at her through narrowed lids. "You do look frail, child. Although," with a generous air, "part of it may be because you've not had a chance to clean up and rest after your long trip. There's nothing makes a girl look more of a mess!"

Diantha kept on smiling, though she was fuming inside. The way Zoe talked, you'd think her face were smudged with cinders and her eyes hollow with weariness.

She said softly, "That's so true. Only I know I'll be all right, out at Johnny's ranch. I've found the West wonderful—so far!"

She gazed directly at Zoe as she said it, and by the quick wonder that came into those sloe eyes, Diantha knew she'd scored a hit.

But Zoe kept her smile as she turned back to Johnny. "You're a bit early for the dance, darling, and I suppose you're anxious to get this poor little waif started for the ranch."

Johnny was silent a moment, frowning. Then he said, "Look, Zoe. It's night, and everything's strange to Diantha. She's our guest and—and—well, I don't like sending her out to the ranch with a strange man."

Diantha's heart skipped a beat, and she couldn't resist a demure glance at the

other girl. Zoe was furious, of course. Any girl would be—having a man practically ask to break an engagement so he could take another girl riding in the moonlight. The thought of that ride was responsible for another missed beat.

But Zoe was clever, too. Her smile was dazzling, her voice positively dripped sympathy, as she said, "Of *course* she doesn't want to take that long drive so late. Johnny darling, I know! The room next to mine is vacant, and I'll engage it for her, right now, and see that she's comfortable before we leave. There's a door between the two rooms, and when the dance is over, I'll slip in and we'll have a nice long chat!" She added brightly, "Then we'll get up early and have breakfast—the three of us together—and we'll all ride on out to the ranch!"

Johnny's face relaxed in a grin. "Fine!" he enthused, and, as Zoe went to the clerk's desk, "You can sleep without any worries, now, can't you?"

Diantha nodded. If she'd spoken that instant, her voice would have broken. Perhaps the angry tears glittered in her eyes, for Johnny spoke up quickly.

"What's the matter, honey?"

"Nothing . . . much," the soft mouth trembled ever so little. "It's just—she spoke of a dance. And Pop and I used to go to dances. He loved them so."

WELL, THAT was true. Devil-may-care Pop always managed to get a bid to any dance, even in a strange town. He'd dance with Diantha at first, then start introducing eager-eyed young men, and from then on Pop would have his own good time. Now, though, Pop was missing all that fun . . . Diantha sighed, thinking of Pop in a small jail cell.

Johnny took her hand, spoke gently. "He'd want you to go to dances again, Diantha. I'm sure he wouldn't want you to grieve too much."

"No," huskily, "he wouldn't even like to see me in mourning this way. He'd want me . . . happy again."

Johnny patted the hand he held. "Know what, honey? We're going to see to that. And before your visit's out, you'll be dancing, I promise it. Zoe and I'll find you a nice partner, and the four of us'll dance all night. How does that sound?"

For once Diantha forgot the game she was playing. "It sounds terrible!" she blurted out.

Thankfully then, she saw the clerk coming with the key. "Please bring my bags up." Then, to Zoe, "Thank you, Miss—Miss Devine. And don't let me delay you. I'll see you in the morning!"

She followed the clerk upstairs, and at the top landing took a quick glance down, to see Johnny's bewildered face and Zoe's smiling one. When she was alone in the small hotel room, the first thing she did was to walk over to the door that led into Zoe's room. It was locked from the other side, but Diantha drew the hasp on her own side, too.

The one thing she didn't want was any after-dance chat with Zoe Devine! She didn't even want to see the dark-haired girl again. And as for Johnny Wing, let him throw himself away on that black-eyed vixen. It would serve him right!

CHAPTER TWO

Waltz for Two

DIANTHA UNDRESSED and washed up. She went to bed, but she couldn't sleep. Maybe she was too tired. Or maybe—well, how *could* a girl hope to sleep with all that dance music drifting from the hall across the street? Heavenly dance music . . . the cool shuffling of many feet on the floor . . . couples dancing . . . Johnny and Zoe . . . with Johnny looking

at the lovely dark-haired girl as if she were the moon—and he a night owl!

Why had she ever come on this crazy trip, Diantha wondered now. Of course, she knew, really. It was to earn the five hundred dollars to get her father out of jail.

The whole thing started two weeks ago when Pop, a star rodeo rider, ran into a bad stretch of luck. First, Pop slipped out one night, got drunk and lost his remuda in a poker game. It happened before, so often that Diantha had learned to ride herd on him pretty heavy. So she shrugged off his escapade and borrowed mounts for herself and Pop from the other riders. They'd have to use their cash prizes to buy their own horses back before the season ended, and it would leave them right where they started. Broke and out of jobs . . . But that, too, had happened before.

This time, though, the bad luck carried over. The next day Pop lost a split-hair decision in the bulldogging contest, and his temper at the same time. He smacked the timer, and when one of the judges rushed down, Pop smacked him, too, even harder. So they put Pop in jail, and he'd have to stay there till Diantha raised five hundred dollars to pay his fine. Rodeo season was ending, so the money had to come from some other source than riding.

She'd made for Kansas City and put an ad in the paper. Too desperate to be modest, she wrote:

Beautiful refined girl wants five hundred dollars quick. Nothing too daring if it's lawful and decent. Wolves please keep to cover.

In spite of the warning, there were wolf-calls a-plenty in the Post Office box for her, but there was one letter that might mean something, and Diantha answered it in person.

J. D. Wing, the wealthy cattle-broker, was sweet, really, in spite of his roar. He was short and round and bald, with a moon face, a broad stick-up nose, and gentle brown eyes, and made Diantha think of a fat poodle she'd owned when she was a very little girl. Even his roar reminded you of the poodle. A deep rumble in his throat when you were expecting a yap.

"By gum!" J. D. roared when he saw her. "You *are* beautiful! And yes, dammit, refined!"

Diantha glowed softly upon him.

He kept on staring. "I didn't believe your ad. I was afraid you'd be a—er—" he coughed delicately, "well, somethin' different. And I had to have a lady!" He gave a satisfied nod. "And you're frail, too. That'll knock Johnny right between the eyes."

"Look, mister," Diantha said firmly, although her smile stayed sweet. "I wouldn't count too much on my frailty, if I were you!"

He chuckled. "I want you to be able to hold your own, but I like your lookin' like an angel, too. You do, you know."

She nodded. "It's always been helpful," she told him, "especially when I was up to something. Which brings me to the subject—what am I supposed to do?"

"Huh?"

"What do you want me to do, to earn the five hundred?"

He began talking, then, of his early struggles . . . and of his son, Johnny Wing. "I wasn't goin' to have Johnny, poor motherless little tyke, go through what I did. Likewise, I didn't want him to be a dude. So I sent him to school out West, away from the city. I let my sister Peg take him to ranches summertimes, and he learned to ride and rope and shoot. Then last year I bought a ranch in Utah—the Flyin' Wing we call it—and I sent him and Peg to run it. He's made good, all right, and the boys take to him. Only one thing . . ." his round face sagged.

"What's wrong?" Diantha was all

sympathy and curiosity over the son.

"He's lost his fool head over a damn girl!" J. D. was shouting again. "Peg wrote me about it. An actress! She's got Johnny all hogtied, and, by gum, I won't have it!" He banged the desk. "I ain't havin' a female like that Zoe Devine for Johnny's wife!"

"Maybe she's a nice girl and he loves her," Diantha put in.

"Love! Balderdash! He's got a nice girl to love right here in Kansas City. Her pa's my partner. It's been understood since they were toddlers that Betsy Ames and Johnny would marry when the time was right, and he's goin' to do it, by gum! And that's what I'm payin' you for. But if you don't send that actress hightailin' it, I ain't payin' you a cussed cent!"

IT WAS a bit confusing, even to a bright girl like Diantha, but at last she got it straight. She, Diantha, was to go out to the Flying Wing ranch and win Johnny away from the actress. Then, when the actress had given up, old J. D. and Betsy would come to the ranch. That would be Diantha's cue to give Johnny the mitten, and he, broken-hearted, would turn to Betsy.

"He's always talked over his troubles with Betsy," J. D. glowered. "He'll turn to her now, and we'll hustle the marriage."

He'd showed Diantha the picture of Johnny, then—the one that looked like a pipsqueak—and she'd been honestly glad that she was expected to hand him over to Betsy Ames, for most surely he was nothing that she, Diantha, would want to keep. It wouldn't be much fun, even luring a guy like that to his doom, but she had to have the five hundred dollars.

"All right," Diantha sighed. "I'm for hire."

"Good!" J. D. beamed and rubbed his hands together. "I'll have Peg tell Johnny you're the daughter of an old friend of mine. He died a short while ago and I found you workin' your life away—with you still all frail from grief and lookin' after your father. So I'm sendin' you to the ranch to get your strength back. I'll write today, and buy you a ticket and give you expense money . . . and from then on you'll have to go it alone."

Diantha's voice stayed soft. "I'll need clothes," she said dreamily. "Mourning, mostly . . . I look lovely in black. Maybe a few things to wear when Johnny wants me to come out of mourning. I can charge them to you . . ."

J. D. reached for his checkbook, "You look like an angel, but, by gum, you've got the heart of a lady wildcat. All right, all right! Get your duds with this. And when you get there, work fast. I want results—and no slip-ups!"

"So do I!" She put the check in her pocketbook, stood up. "I want that five hundred, and I want it bad!"

So she got the clothes and she came on out to Utah. For a few minutes she'd thought she was making wonderful progress . . . especially when Johnny had kissed her. Then Zoe had come along and walked off with Johnny, leaving Diantha to come upstairs and go to bed.

Remembering all that filled Diantha with fury. She sat up, and the strains of dance music again seemed to taunt her ears. For a moment she stood it, then she threw off the covers and jumped out of bed. Jerking down the shade and putting on the light, she began tearing things out of her bags.

She stopped at the white, off-the-shoulder gown. It was a simple dress, but an exquisite one, for J. D.'s check had been ample, and it made Diantha look more like an angel than a real angel could possibly look. She shook the few wrinkles from the dress, and hung it up while she made herself ready—brushed her golden hair until it hung in a shining cascade of curls down her back; powdered her face until it was hauntingly pale and

lovely; sprinkled lavender water over her underthings. And then she slipped on the gown.

It was perfect. Diantha smiled at herself in the mirror. If Johnny's heart had twisted at the sight of her in mourning, it would surely do a series of flip-flops now, and no fooling. He'd be a bit shocked probably, for he'd seen her only in black. But she could make him forget his shock; she'd be sweet this time, and she'd redeem herself for letting the imp get the better part of the angel there at the last, down in the parlor.

She wrapped a cloak about her shoulders and started for the door, and again her heart began to beat in that quick disturbed fashion. The way Johnny had looked at Zoe . . . the dark-haired girl had a plenty good start in the race for Johnny's love.

"She's a vixen, Johnny!" Diantha whispered. "You've got to know that. You've got to realize I'm the right one for you . . ."

Right then, Diantha should have taken time to remember Betsy Ames, the girl who was really the right one for Johnny. But she didn't. She could only think of Johnny.

A TIMID girl would never have gone to the dance hall alone. A timid girl wouldn't even have walked past the group of men who stood just outside the door, smoking and talking. But Diantha wasn't shy. She had learned early to take care of herself, outside the rodeo, so groups of lounging males held no terror for her whatever—though one would never have guessed it now.

Smiling timidly, with eyes demurely lowered, Diantha walked through the aisle they instinctively made for her, and not a sound was uttered. Inside, the man at the door merely smiled, apparently thinking she was somebody's partner who'd slipped outdoors for an instant.

Diantha stood there at the edge of the floor, her eyes going over the dancing couples. She saw them then . . . Johnny Wing and Zoe Devine. Her hands clenched in the folds of her skirt and her blue eyes blazed behind the dark lashes. For Johnny was holding Zoe close, and his eyes held a dazed look, as if he were looking at something gloriously bright.

Whatever progress Diantha had made, there in the hotel parlor, was lost now. She knew Johnny had forgotten her as completely as if they'd never met. It was a good thing she had come, Diantha told herself. Especially since Zoe was edging toward the side door that opened out into the starlit, beautiful night. Once she got Johnny out there, just the two of them . . .

Diantha turned back to the doorman. She asked sweetly, "Will you please let Miss Devine know that there's—well, a gentleman who wants to see her at the hotel, urgently. Alone. And please don't let her know I brought the message. I think she'd rather . . . I didn't know about the gentleman," she finished, very shyly.

"These actresses!" he smirked. "Don't worry. I'll give her the message, myself." And he pushed his big bulk through the dancers.

Diantha saw him touch Zoe's arm, whisper something. She saw, too, the look of alarm on the dark beautiful face. And she smiled wickedly, as Zoe excused herself from Johnny and hurried away.

Diantha would have to hurry, too, for Johnny, left alone, started for that side door—and a smoke, probably. Slipping along the edge of the floor, Diantha reached the exit just as Johnny came up to it.

"Hello, Johnny," she said softly.

He stared, blinked.

"Don't you remember me, Johnny?" There was a little catch in her voice. "It's Diantha . . . Diantha Day. I couldn't sleep, and I got to thinking over what

you said about—about Pop wanting me to be happy—and I got so lonesome. So—so I came over to watch the dance a moment. You don't think it's wrong if I just watch, Johnny?" plaintively.

He smiled, with that sudden lighting up of his whole face. "Why, of course not, sugar! There's nothing wrong in watching. And—" looking down at her as she drew a little closer to him, "there's nothing wrong in a tiny whirl on the floor. Come on, honey!"

She caught her breath. "But the music's so fast and lively! If it were a waltz . . . it wouldn't seem so awful."

Johnny grinned. "A waltz it shall be!" and he left her to go to the musician's platform.

So Diantha's first dance with Johnny was a waltz; a dreamy waltz to dreamy music that echoed like a love song through the place. Everyone felt it. The chatter died and the couples danced silently under the spell of it.

Diantha counted on that spell. She counted on Johnny feeling it, but she hadn't realized what it would do to *her*. Johnny's arms about her . . . Johnny's cheek close to hers . . . Diantha felt as if all reality faded away When she looked up at him, there were tears—real tears of happiness—clinging to her long, cobwebby lashes.

JOHNNY DIDN'T speak. He just whirled her close to the side door—the side door Zoe'd had her mind on—and, still keeping his arm about her, he turned the knob. Then they were outside, with the leaves of a big cottonwood making dancing moon-shadows on the ground, and with stars blinking like candles overhead.

"Poor baby!" Johnny said, holding her close. "You're such a dear little thing, Diantha. Just cry it out, sugar. It'll help you. You're never goin' to be lonely again, I promise that!"

"Never, Johnny?"

"Never!" he repeated solemnly, and he began dabbing gently at the tear-stained cheeks with his big white handkerchief.

"You're . . . so good, Johnny."

Her face was still uplifted, very close to his, and Johnny accepted the invitation. His lips sought hers, and once more Diantha found the world filled with magic. It was as if the earth were filled with the sweetness of all the flowers that had bloomed that day . . . with the beautiful music of all the birds that had lifted their hearts in song . . . with the loveliness of all the lovely things, everywhere.

After a long moment, Diantha asked huskily, "You're sure, Johnny—about me never being lonely again?"

"Of course, little Diantha. I'll always be your friend. Always." There was silence, and then he went on slowly, awkwardly, as if not quite sure of what he wanted to say. "Both Zoe and I," he finished, and dropped his arms from about Diantha.

It was like a slap in the face. Diantha knew a tearing hurt, as if her heart were being pulled apart. But, like a real slap to the face of a sleeper, it jerked her awake, made her remember that this was not real. This was part of her job—for five hundred dollars—and time was running out. Any minute, now, Zoe would be back, furious.

It was good, having something definite to do; it helped keep down the hurt. Diantha's eyes went very wide, very innocent.

"But—Zoe won't want to be my friend, Johnny," she said in a desperate little voice. "She won't even understand about *you* wanting to."

"Of course, she will, honey." He grinned. "You don't know Zoe. She's the sweetest girl in the world!"

"But if she *doesn't*, Johnny!"

"I'll still be your friend," he smiled

gently. "That's a faithful promise . . ."

The promise would have to do, for it was all Diantha had time to get. Zoe appeared in the doorway behind Johnny, her beautiful face a mask of fury, her long white fingers clenched to fists.

"Oh!" Diantha gave a terrified cry and shrank back, and Johnny whirled to see what had frightened her.

But Zoe was quicker. Like magic came the smile, and her voice was again honey-cream. "Just a mistake about the message, darling. And if here isn't little Diantha! What a nice surprise! It's so lovely out here, isn't it . . . let's all stay a while. Will you get my cape, Johnny?"

"Of course! I knew you'd be glad to find Diantha here." And he grinned broadly in an I-told-you-so way as he went back inside the hall.

Zoe's sweet mask dropped, then. Her eyes blazed and her lips were a tight scarlet line. "Just what are you after?" she demanded harshly. "Oh, you don't fool me any with that innocent look and the baby line!"

"Maybe," the wicked dimple flashed at the corner of Diantha's pretty mouth, "I'm after the same thing you are."

"Well, it won't work! I'm smarter than you are, my girl, and I'll not stand for your interference!"

"I think you're going to have to," Diantha said very deliberately, then waited for the storm to break.

IT CAME, just as she had expected, but not in words. With a gasp of fury, Zoe raised her hand and brought the palm down in a stinging blow across Diantha's cheek.

"You—you hussy!" Diantha blazed.

Instinctively, she caught her breath, tensed her young, steel-like muscles, ready to spring. Her fingers curved, prepared to fight as a lioness fights—with claws. But she stopped suddenly. Beyond Zoe, she saw the door opening. Johnny—with Zoe's wrap. He'd take in any scene . . .

Very low, but very distinctly, she called Zoe a choice, but inelegant name. Then, quick as a flash she put up an arm, as if to ward off a blow. She cried out, "Don't hit me again! It's only that Johnny and I want to be friends!"

"You dirty, unspeakable little liar!" Zoe exclaimed, and again Diantha's cheek stung with a slap.

Even as Diantha dropped to the ground, a huddled small heap, sobbing out, "Don't! Oh, don't hit me again," Johnny was running toward them.

Then his arms were about Diantha and he was lifting her up. "Don't cry so, honey. You're all right now!"

He held her tight against him while he lashed out at Zoe, "What do you mean, hitting this poor little thing? Are you crazy?"

"No, I'm not crazy!" Zoe panted. "But you sure are! You let yourself be taken in by the schemes of a little cheat! You let her pull the wool over your eyes—"

"Hush!" Johnny said sternly. "Hush that drivel!"

"Oh, Johnny," Diantha moaned, "I've brought trouble to you by my friendship. I told you how she'd feel about us. I—"

"She's a liar!" Zoe shrilled. "She doesn't want friendship—she wants *you*! Oh, you fool! Can't you see she's playing you for a sucker, and you're swallowing her bait, hook, line and sinker?"

Johnny stood very straight, then, but he kept one arm about Diantha. He said, "You're talking like an idiot, Zoe. Diantha is my guest. She's here because my father sent her, and she's staying. All she wants is my friendship, and she's going to have it. And you and all-hell can't stop it!"

For an instant the fight went out of Zoe; she looked shocked, as if she knew she'd gone too far. She started to speak, but Diantha was there ahead of her.

"Don't quarrel—over me, Johnny,"

she begged, nursing her bruised cheek with one small hand. "Please! All I want is for her to believe in you again. It doesn't matter . . . so much . . about me."

"But it does matter!" he ground out. "It matters a lot. You owe Diantha an apology, Zoe—and a real one, at that!"

The fight was back in Zoe again. "Me —apologize to *her*!" she blazed. "I'll see her dead, first! And you, too, Johnny Wing!"

Then she whirled, grabbed her cape off Johnny's arm, and ran along the dark side of the building and across the street.

For a moment there was silence, there under the big cottonwood, with the moon-shadows dancing on the ground. All at once Johnny made a move as if to follow Zoe, but Diantha drew a little closer to him.

"I'm so sorry, Johnny," she whispered. "Is there anything I can do?"

He looked down at her, his face all bewildered. "No," he said slowly, "there's nothin' anybody can do. It wasn't your fault—Zoe's got to apologize to you. She had no reason to treat you so." His fumbling hand began smoothing Diantha's hair as if he were only half conscious of her. "She's always seemed so understanding, so sweet. And yet . . ." his voice trailed off.

"Maybe," Diantha said huskily, "it'll be better to go on out home, Johnny. Give her time to think it over, and she'll be sorry. I know I would, if I were Zoe."

He smiled in a twisted way. "Thanks, sugar. I guess a girl ought to know another girl's mind. So have the clerk collect your gear. Aunt Peg'll likely be worryin' about you not comin' before this, anyway."

She nodded, and together they walked across the street to the hotel. Then Diantha slipped upstairs and did her packing, very quietly, lest Zoe, who might be next door, hear her and come flying. When it was all done, Diantha herself carried her bags down the stairs, and was ready when Johnny came back for her.

So Diantha and Johnny drove out to the Flying Wing, just the two of them, after all. They rode through the quiet of a night made magic by moon and stars and evening breezes, but Diantha wasn't as happy as she should have been. For Johnny's eyes looked straight ahead, his face all taut, as if he had left something of his youth behind him in town that night.

He turned once when Diantha was looking at the stars. "What are you whispering?"

She smiled a little. *"Star light, star bright . . ."* she recited. *"Wish I may, wish I might, have the wish—"*

She didn't finish. She couldn't tell Johnny of the wish that had suddenly grown in her heart.

CHAPTER THREE

To Hold—and to Have

THE FLYING Wing was a big ranch, high in the mountains that seemed to sprawl over the countryside.

"It's beautiful!" Diantha exclaimed as they drove up the long lane to the rambling ranch-house. "So beautiful!"

"Wait until you see it all," Johnny told her, rousing some from his quietness. "There's a canyon to the north there—Weeping Rock Canyon—with a stream running through it, ice-cold. It's a swell place for picnics." Then he added, grinning. "And there's Aunt Peg! I figured she'd be waitin'."

Diantha had formed a mental picture of a gentle spinster, middle-aged. Her jaw dropped a little when she saw Peggy Wing in the flesh, walking toward them from the moon-lit porch. For Aunt Peg

was large—almost six feet tall she must have been, and wide of shoulder, with sandy hair drawn back and screwed to a bun that continually shifted from one side of her head to the other. Her eyes were green and shrewd, her voice loud and harsh.

"Johnny Wing!" she shouted when he drew to a stop. "I ought to whale you! You said you'd send the girl out with Hank and here I've been picturin' all sorts of dire happenin's."

Johnny grinned as he got out. "I wanted to fetch her myself," he said and chucked his aunt under the chin. "Aunt Peg, this is Diantha Day. I reckon we're both ready for somethin' to eat. How about some flapjacks and coffee?"

"I'll flapjack you!" she threatened. "But go and wash up. Diantha—you come with me."

There in the kitchen, Peggy Wing faced Diantha.

"J. D. wrote me about it," she said bluntly, "but you can fetch me up to date. How come Johnny brought you home himself, when he was fixin' to dance with that actress?"

Diantha smiled, demurely. "He was afraid I'd be unhappy riding out with a strange man. Then—there were delays."

Quickly, she told what had happened. That is, most of it. The way Johnny had kissed her, the emotions he'd aroused in her . . . those things were her own, and she gave no report on them.

"You're clever," Aunt Peg conceded. "Right down smart and clever, I can see that!" She put the coffee pot on the stove and began collecting flapjack ingredients. "You'll likely wind the job up in no time, and in a way I'm sorry," raising her voice to shout above the clang of putting the skillet on. "It'd be a pleasure, havin' a smart girl like you around for a spell. I get tired of havin' nobody but addle-pated males around me."

Diantha sank into the wooden rocker, watching Aunt Peg. When a moment of quietness came, she said, with a queer resentment, "You'll have a female here eventually—for good. Betsy Ames!"

Aunt Peg cracked three eggs sharply against the rim of a yellow bowl, then nodded briskly. "That I will, and it pleasures me even to think of it. Take a man she can look up to and adore—like Johnny—and she'll be a good and faithful wife. One to have and to hold, from the weddin' day forward!"

Her loud voice held a pious note as she took the bowl in the crook of her arm and violently began beating the mixture.

Diantha was glad she didn't have to talk any more. *To have and to hold.* The old words from the marriage ceremony seemed to din in Diantha's ears above the clatter Aunt Peg was making.

Johnny had held Diantha in his arms, but he had no thought of keeping her. The night had caught them both in a magic spell for a moment, but there was nothing of that ecstasy she dared hold on to . . .

"All I can hold is five hundred dollars," she told herself crossly, "to get Pop out of jail! And I won't even have that if I don't ride it out as a cheat and a liar. Oh, well—it's all for Pop and Betsy. They're the ones that'll hold and have!"

But there was a hollow feeling within her that Diantha knew, all at once, no amount of Aunt Peg's flapjacks could ever fill.

SHE SAW very little of Johnny the next few days. A rush of work came to the Flying Wing, and he was out early and home late, taking his meals with the outfit. Diantha saw him only evenings, and it isn't easy for a girl to lure a man when his mind is occupied with stray steers!

There was something else, of course, a remoteness about Johnny that kept him a little out of Diantha's reach. He was kind

to her, very gentle and considerate, but his eyes were so often a bit bewildered. Sometimes Diantha could have beaten at him with her fists, for treating her like a dear little sister, but she didn't dare. She kept her blue eyes wide and innocent, she smiled at him shyly, and spoke in a low soft voice, letting him know how happy she was to be here, and how grateful she was to him for everything.

"You're so good to let me stay here," she told Johnny that third evening, at supper. "You and Aunt Peg," demurely.

"Good?" Johnny smiled. "I don't know what we'd do without you. You fit right in. Doesn't she, Aunt Peg?"

"Like a glove!" Aunt Peg gave him a piercing look as she poured his coffee.

Well, maybe she wasn't making the proper headway with Johnny, Diantha comforted herself, but neither was Zoe Devine. Johnny hadn't ridden into town once, all these three days. That was something . . .

She looked at Johnny now from under her long lashes. "Everything is so beautiful here, Johnny," she said impulsively. "Could I have a horse to ride? I'd love to see more of the country. There's that little black in the corral—the one you call Tricks."

Johnny threw back his head and laughed, then. "She'd have you thrown before you got out of the corral, sugar. Then she'd be off to Weepin' Rock Canyon, to get wilder by the day. She's plumb full of tricks— That's how she got her name!"

"And that's why she's your favorite!" Aunt Peg slammed Johnny's pie in front of him. "Too light for a cow pony, and meaner'n a polecat, yet you're never so busy but what you'll drop anything to go hunt her when she gets away!"

"She keeps me guessin' all right!" Johnny chuckled. "Meek as a lamb on the surface, but with the heart of a devil." Then to Diantha, "If you want to start ridin', honey, I'll leave a horse in the small corral."

Johnny left the horse, all right; an amiable old gray gelding who could be urged to a slow trot now and then, but no more, and from whose broad back Diantha couldn't have fallen any more than from a rocking chair. Diantha—the daredevil girl-rider, who used to risk her neck day after day in the arena, and glory in it.

"That idiot Johnny!" Diantha told her slowpoke mount as he ambled along in the sage-tanged breeze that next morning. "Giving me a skate like this to ride! As if I'm a baby! As if—"

She stopped, peering ahead. Just beyond the next rise, she could hear the plod of hoofs. Could it be Johnny? Her heart skipped a little, then almost stopped. For horse and rider appeared over the crest now, and both were familiar. The way the man rode, the youthful air of him, the broad swinging shoulders, the silver-trimmed riding gear—

"Pop!" she cried. "Pop!"

HE TOOK off his hat, waved it, then spurred his horse toward her. The next minute she was clinging to him—until she remembered.

"Pop!" she gasped, throwing back her head. "What are you doing here? Did you break jail?"

He laughed. "Nope! Just played a good poker game, baby! It was a mighty lonesome town, so the boys took to droppin' into the jail house for poker, nights. I had a run o' luck; enough to pay my fine and get my horses back. So here I am!"

"But, Pop! I wrote you—"

"I know, but I didn't like the sound of it, Diantha. You'd taken a job, you said, to earn my fine-money. You couldn't write often, and me not at all, since I was supposed to be dead. It didn't sound good, pet, not for a reckless little devil like you. So I've come to tell you to quit your job.

I'm alive again, and my pockets are jinglin'!"

"Pop, I can't quit! It's a special sort of a job." And she told him, swiftly. Not everything, of course . . . not of the way her heart pounded when Johnny came near, nor how much she wanted him to kiss her again. That was strictly confidential, with her own heart.

"So you see, Pop, it's a perfectly decent job," she finished, "and it wouldn't be fair to quit. Not after I promised."

Pop rubbed a hand across his face. "Well, maybe you're right, baby!" He was a stickler for promises. "But I don't like it, so you wind it up quick and turn this jasper over to the Betsy gal mighty soon, or I'll take a hand."

"But Pop—" Diantha cried, not knowing why she was so alarmed at the prospect of finishing the job quickly. "You mustn't take a hand! You might spoil things!"

"Why will I? I'll make out I'm a rodeo rider, broke, and wantin' a job to tide me over till spring. Mebby I can sort of give matters a push and nobody'll be the wiser."

Diantha's heart sank. It was like Pop to want a finger in every pie. And if the pie was too hot it wasn't Pop who got burned, but likely some bystander.

"Pop, I wish you wouldn't try to help," she said again.

"Now don't you worry, baby!" he returned grandly.

BUT DIANTHA did worry as she rode on. She had to work fast now before Pop—with the best of intentions—had a chance to try out whatever wild scheme he could think up. What was more, Zoe Devine would make some move soon, as well. Right now the actress was biding her time, Diantha was sure, wanting Johnny to take the first step toward reconciliation. When he didn't— "And he never will!" Diantha vowed—then Zoe would take matters into her own hands.

When she reached the ranch much later, she saw Tricks, Johnny's favorite black mare, standing in the corral, looking as gentle as a kitten. Diantha stared at her. Why hadn't she thought of it before?

She looked about carefully, and saw only Chuck Logan, the yard hand, slumped in the shade of a cottonwood, snoring. Swiftly, quietly, she took down the corral pole . . . the next. Tricks turned and watched her intently, switching her long tail as Diantha took down another pole.

"Come on, sweetheart," Diantha whispered, as from one outlaw spirit to another. "You can do it now, and it'll be Weeping Rock Canyon for you till Johnny and I come after you!"

Tricks must have understood her language, for she wheeled suddenly and ran in a wide circle, the sound of her hoofs muffled in the deep dry sand. Then she vaulted over the lowered place in the fence, went running down the lane and away. Chuck Logan slept on.

Swiftly, Diantha put back all but the top pole, then went up to the house. Aunt Peg was waiting on the porch.

"I got eyes," she rasped, "but I didn't stop you. I hope you're still in your senses. This means Johnny'll stop right in the rush of work to go traipsin' after that mare."

"Maybe I could ride along," Diantha suggested. "I'd *love* to see the canyon."

Aunt Peg grunted. "I might have known! You're smart and I'll be missin' you when you leave here for good." Then, "Johnny's taken on a new ranch hand. A rodeo rider called Pop Curly. Nice fellow, too. I like his ways."

Diantha tried not to show how startled she was. Pop had acted fast!

"Well," Aunt Peg went on, "I'll tell Johnny about the mare tonight. And reckon I'd better bake up somethin' so you two can carry a lunch."

"Well, have him give me a better horse than that gray gelding," Diantha suggested.

"Yes. You might as well enjoy yourself," Aunt Peg agreed, "even if it is a business trip, as you might say."

A business trip? Diantha didn't feel as if she were on any business trip when she started out with Johnny early that next morning, a morning that seemed made, out of all eternity, just for them.

She felt as if she and Johnny were starting on a journey into Paradise itself.

CHAPTER FOUR

Snake in Eden

WAPING ROCK Canyon was a bit of paradise, all right. Diantha caught her breath as they dropped over the rim and began descending the switchback trail, it was that beautiful!

The canyon was deep and narrow, with red rocky walls carved to strange shapes. One big rock—the weeping rock—had water seeping down its face, to spill into the creek that tumbled swiftly over the floor. Grass and trees grew along the banks and it was cool and shadowy after the dusty heat above.

"It's beautiful, Johnny!" Diantha exclaimed as they stopped a moment so she could enjoy the view.

"Like this it is," Johnny grinned. "But she can be a heller after a cloudburst, or after a heavy rain, even. Doesn't take anything at all to bring a gullywasher through here. At the bottom end there's a pile of boulders as big as a house, all brought down in the floods." Then, "I'm goin' to find Tricks first thing. Want to come along, or want to rest here a little longer?"

Now
Sue's dated up for weeks ahead
OH BOY, BETTY! THREE INVITATIONS TO THE SAME DANCE!
SIS, WILL I BE POPULAR LIKE YOU WHEN I GROW UP?
SURE, IF YOU DO WHAT I DO -USE DADDY'S LIFEBUOY SOAP.
LIFEBUOY IS THE ONLY SOAP ESPECIALLY MADE TO STOP B.O.-CONTAINS AN EXCLUSIVE PURIFYING INGREDIENT. MY DAILY LIFEBUOY BATH GIVES LASTING ALL-OVER PROTECTION.
LIFEBUOY SURE PROVED TO ME THAT MEN FALL FOR GIRLS WHO ARE SWEET AND DAINTY!
MY DAILY LIFEBUOY BATH GIVES ME LASTING PROTECTION FROM B.O.... MAKES ME FEEL SO FRESH. USE LIFEBUOY FOR A WEEK AND YOU'LL USE IT FOR LIFE!
LIFEBUOY HEALTH SOAP
Used in the homes of 40 million Americans
ANOTHER FINE LEVER PRODUCT

"I don't need to rest," she told him, so they rode together up the winding canyon, to find the straying mare, splashing again and again through the tumbling creek as the trail crossed from side to side.

Johnny caught up with Tricks soon enough, and drove the mare back, leaving her to graze in a little cove.

"I'll keep the halter on," he said. "But it makes her mad to be tied, so we better stay and watch her. And now, how about eating?"

Aunt Peg had packed a full lunch-basket: cold fried chicken, potato salad, devilled eggs, spiced beets, a jar of strawberry jam, fresh bread and butter, apple turnovers glazed with sugar and cinnamon. It was like keeping house, Diantha thought, as she spread everything out on a flat-topped boulder. It was like getting Johnny's dinner.

There was a great sweetness in the hour, eating together there in the quiet canyon. There was a spell about it . . . something that made Diantha tremble as she packed away the remnants of the lunch, then sat beside Johnny on the grassy creek bank.

Abruptly, Johnny caught her hand and began talking about himself, as if it were important she should know. He told of a lonely boyhood, spent in schools, with the happy summers between—summers when he and Aunt Peg stayed at various ranches.

"But I was lucky," he told her. "Dad let me do as I pleased and become a cowman. Lots of parents try to interfere with their children's future, but not Dad!"

Diantha looked away, remembering J. D. Wing shouting out, "I'll not have that girl for Johnny's wife!" Remembering that he had sent her all the way here, just so he *could* interfere in Johnny's future.

She said huskily, "I guess that even when they do interfere, Johnny, they mean it for your happiness."

Johnny shook his head. "It's one thing I never could have stood," he told her. "I'd have been sure to go off in the wrong direction if Dad had tried to force me, so it's a good thing he didn't. Anyway," he added, "nobody knows where another person's happiness lies. Sometimes we don't even know it ourselves." He went quiet for a moment, but his fingers tightened on Diantha's.

Finally he grinned at her. "Now," he ordered, "tell me about you!" He was leaning back against a tree trunk.

She looked at him, met the candid gaze of his warm brown eyes—and felt sick inside, because of the lie she was living. Tears came suddenly . . . real tears.

Johnny saw them and sat up, pulling her head to his shoulder. "I'm sorry, honey!" he exclaimed. "I had no right to make you remember your grief. Just forget it, dear. Please, Diantha . . ."

She looked at him, smiling through her tears, trying to forget everything but this heavenly moment. And right then the snake entered Eden.

FOR A voice called, in all its rich smoothness, "Johnny! Johnny dear!" and Zoe came riding down the switchback, looking like a picture as she let her horse make its sure-footed way along the rocky stretch.

"Zoe!" Johnny exclaimed huskily. His face went pale but his eyes brightened as he jumped up and strode over to meet her.

Zoe stopped her horse near the creek-bank and Johnny lifted her down. "What is it, Zoe? And how did you know where we were?"

She smiled. "One of your cowhands told me—a handsome man, Johnny, with curly blond hair."

"Pop Curly!" Johnny grinned, and Diantha nodded, her mouth tight. It would be Pop, all right, forgetting his grand plans to help Diantha, at sight of a pretty face. He probably hadn't even

wondered if Zoe were the other woman in Johnny's life.

"He rode most of the way here with me," Zoe went on, "but I wanted to come down here alone. I—well, I knew it would be easier that way. I could keep my courage better."

"Does it take courage to see me?" Johnny asked.

Diantha's hand clenched in the pockets of her riding jeans, at sight of Johnny's face. It was that of a child, seeing the tree on Christmas morning. Her hurt was drowned out by the surge of anger she suddenly knew.

She turned and started to walk away, but Zoe called out, "Don't go, Diantha. I've come to apologize, as Johnny wants me to—about the other night. I don't know why I did it, Johnny, except that I love you so! It was hard to have you turn to another girl, even in friendship. Will you both forgive me?" Her eyes were wickedly soft under the long lashes.

"Why, of course!" Johnny caught Zoe's hand and reached out for Diantha's, too. "Don't we, Diantha?" Without waiting for an answer, he went on, "And it was mighty brave of you, Zoe, to come here like this. Diantha and I appreciate it, and from now on the three of us all will go on as if nothing had happened back there!"

Oh, will we! Diantha thought, but Zoe returned, a catch in her voice, "Thanks, Johnny! Oh, thanks!" She swayed toward Johnny and for an instant Diantha thought he was going to take the dark-haired girl in his arms.

Johnny didn't, but the bewilderment was back in his eyes again, and the beautiful closeness that had come this afternoon, was all gone now. A thousand furies raged in Diantha's small body.

Zoe went on in her smooth tones, "I've missed you, Johnny, and since we're all friends again—" a quick little breath, then, "Johnny, there is so much to talk about, and since Diantha isn't used to this country—can she ride home with Pop Curly while you and I take the long trail home? I know Diantha woudn't care, and we could take her up to Pop."

Johnny's face went troubled, and the furies mingled with a great dark hurt in Diantha. Johnny was going to agree, she was sure of it! The lovely shade-dappled canyon, the blue sky overhead, the world that had been paradise . . . all of it whirled in ugly spirals for a moment. She looked away from Johnny so he wouldn't glimpse the sick defeat in her eyes, and her gaze fell upon the erring Tricks—the horse that looked so demure but was a devil at heart.

She had used the mare once . . . she could again.

With a terrific effort Diantha pushed the fury back and made her eyes gentle and hurt. "It's all right, Johnny," she said huskily. "I don't mind. If you—if you'll get my horse . . ."

Johnny looked at her, then suddenly he grinned. "Sorry, but I brought you here, sugar, and I'm takin' you home! The three of us'll ride back to the ranch together. I'll get the horses now." Then, to Zoe, "We can talk on the way in to town."

"Of course!" Zoe said quickly, but her quick glance at Diantha was still triumphant. If she wasn't getting her way now, Johnny was going to ride back to town with her . . . alone. "I'll go with you to get the horses, Johnny."

"Coming, Diantha?" Johnny asked.

She shook her head, then watched them walk away together, up the trail, around a bend, where the mounts were grazing. As soon as they were out of sight, Diantha moved swiftly. It took a moment to catch the mare, but Diantha understood every trick a horse could pull, so in no time at all she had hold of the halter. Then, with one hand in the bushy mane, she flung herself to the bare back of the startled animal, and with a sharp slap on the rump,

sent Tricks up the rocky switch-back trail.

AS DIANTHA neared the rim of the canyon, she heard Johnny's shout from below. "For heaven's sake, Diantha —stop!"

She bent low, pretending to be clinging for dear life, as Tricks went over the rock-rim and out of sight of the canyon. Then she had to give all her attention to the ride. The mare was full of run. Stretching out, she skimmed the ground, but Diantha wasn't afraid, even though she had neither saddle beneath her, nor bit to curb the bolting horse. She could ride anything that stayed topside up, but she couldn't let her thoughts wander while she did it!

To the west she saw Pop making for her, but she waved him back. For Johnny was coming.

She heard the hoofs pounding behind her, heard Johnny's encouraging shout, "Stay with it, Diantha! Hang on!"

Diantha bent lower over Tricks' neck, pretending to cling frantically—while she yelled at the mare's ear, to bring out another burst of speed. It was like riding the wind. Diantha's yellow hair, cascaded wildly about her shoulders. The wind whipped the rose to her cheeks, and excitement made her blue eyes almost black.

Finally the chance she sought came. There was a short, steep dip in the trail that carried her out of Johnny's sight. Going down, Diantha flung herself about until she hung like a mealsack across Tricks' back. When the sharp rise slowed the animal's speed a moment, she dropped to the ground and rolled swiftly away from the plunging heels . . . as Tricks galloped on.

She lay very still, eyes closed, as Johnny came up. She heard his choked cry and then he was bending over her and his voice was hoarse with worry.

"Diantha! Diantha darlin'!" he cried, and his arms gathered her up, held her close against his heart. "Oh, my sweet! My sweet!" His lips were on her forehead, her cheek . . . and then her mouth.

It wasn't within Diantha's power to pretend unconsciousness when Johnny's lips were upon hers. Had she been dead, she felt as if life would surely have returned under the magic of Johnny's kiss. Her arms went about his neck and for a long, long moment their lips stayed together and time stood still, because nothing else in the world mattered.

Finally, Johnny lifted his head and looked down at her, his brown eyes golden with tenderness. "You're all right, sweet? Oh, darlin', why did you do it? You might have been killed!"

Truth crowded her lips. *I couldn't have been killed, Johnny,* she wanted to tell him honestly, *for I can ride anything that stays on its feet! It was wrong to scare you, Johnny, and I'm sorry.* But she dared not. Johnny would hate a liar. She must go on playing the game . . .

"Why did you do it, darlin'?" Johnny asked again.

"Because everything was changed," she whispered. "*She* doesn't want you to be friends with me. *She* wanted to send me away."

"But I didn't let you go," Johnny answered softly. "I couldn't."

"But if I'd stayed, it would have spoiled things for her," Diantha persisted, her blue eyes anxious behind the curtain of incredibly long lashes. "And that might spoil things for you. I'd rather be killed than hurt you, Johnny!"

His arms tightened suddenly. "You couldn't hurt me, darlin' . . unless you got yourself hurt. Oh, Diantha, Diantha! I love you so!" And this time his mouth was a frantic, hungry demand upon hers.

JOY FLOODED Diantha, a joy deeper and yet higher than any she had ever known before. And, like the sun breaking through night-black clouds, came the blinding beautiful realization—the sweet truth

that she spoke out in words, "I love you, too, Johnny! Oh, I love you *so* very, very much!"

She *did* love Johnny! She had come here to make him love her, and she had been heart-trapped herself. She loved him . . . loved him more than life itself!

"Johnny, Johnny!" she whispered, her head at his shoulder. "Tell me again!"

This time he repeated it solemnly, and his words were like a vow. "I love you, sweet. I want you for my wife. Will you marry me, darlin'?"

"Yes, oh, yes, Johnny!"

The sound of hoofs sent them apart. Pop came riding over the crest; sat there, looking at them from eyes quizzically bright. He said, "Well, reckon I'd better ride back to the canyon and gather up what you left."

Johny nodded. "Please, Curly. Fetch Diantha's mount—and Miss Devine." He spoke the name as if it were an afterthought.

Pop whistled, his blue eyes wide. "So *that* was Zoe Devine! Well, I'll be—" He swallowed, then went on, "I'll likely not be able to pick up that black mare right away, but she'll be all right, I guess. No draggin' rope or anything."

"She'll drift back to the canyon," Johnny said, "and I'll get her again later."

Pop left, and Johnny didn't wait for him to bring the other horse. He lifted Diantha up to the back of his own mount, then vaulted up behind her, and they rode away together, back-trailing over the road they'd travelled this morning—but still on their way to paradise. As they rode, a new song filled Diantha's heart, a chant. Johnny loved her. Johnny wanted her for his wife. Johnny . . . Johnny . . .

They came in sight of the ranch-house and he whispered, "Your new home, sweet. Our home to be." He stopped the horse so they could gaze at it together, lost in dreams.

Suddenly Johnny straightened and yelled out, "Look! There's Dad!" He sent the horse ahead at a run.

Diantha's hands clenched and the joy that had filled her drained away. It wasn't only the sight of plump J. D. down there, waddling down the dooryard to the gate, that jerked her back to reality. It was the girl beside him—the small, too-thin girl whose hair shone red under the afternoon sun.

Johnny saw her, too. "And Betsy's here! Betsy Ames!" he exclaimed excitedly, his voice pleasure-filled.

Diantha's throat throbbed with terror. Betsy Ames here! Old J. D. had brought Betsy out to comfort Johnny when Diantha turned him down. She was the girl J. D. wanted for Johnny's wife—and the elder Wing wasn't one to give up without a fight.

Diantha had never minded the prospect of a fight before, not ever in her whole life. She'd never been really afraid before, either . . . But she was now. Terribly, sickeningly afraid.

Only one thing was clear. She wasn't going to give up Johnny!

CHAPTER FIVE

Three Girls for Johnny

DIANTHA WOULD have liked Betsy Ames under any other conditions. She admitted that to herself before the first few minutes were over. Betsy wasn't pretty. Her simply-combed red hair framed a pointed, freckled face, her eyes were greenish, but they were kind and friendly, and her wide mouth seemed shaped for good humor and sympathy. Her voice was gentle and calm, yet strong.

She'd make a fine friend, Diantha judged; one who would stand by, no matter what happened. But she also knew

she could never have Betsy for a friend. Instead, she was going to have to hurt her. For Betsy loved Johnny—the way she looked at him spoke volumes. Not violently and completely, as Diantha herself loved him, but in a quiet, gentle way.

"I'm so glad you're here," Betsy said, after the first greetings. "It'll be nice to have another girl at the ranch."

"Yes," J.D. spoke up. "It's too bad Diantha won't be stayin' much longer." He was looking from Johnny to Diantha, his thick brows drawn together.

Johnny demanded, "Hey, what makes you think she won't be stayin' much longer? She's here to stay!" Then, "You came just in time to hear the big news, you two. And you also, Aunt Peg," as the big woman came out to the porch.

His arm drew Diantha close. "It all happened very suddenly, but Diantha has promised to marry me, folks. So meet the future Mrs. Johnny Wing!"

There was silence, then Betsy came forward. "Johnny, you're so lucky! And you, too, Diantha. I've known Johnny a long, long time, and he's pretty fine." She kissed Diantha, who wasn't quite sure whether she saw misty tears in the green eyes or not.

Aunt Peg said hoarsely, "I suspected as much!" and old J.D. rumbled like an asthmatic poodle. Just what he might have said right then Diantha never knew, for Pop came riding up. Pop—and Zoe.

Pop said, "The young lady has a sprained ankle, so we've been quite a spell gettin' home."

"I ran for my horse to follow you, Johnny," Zoe explained low, "and tripped over a loose rock."

"Oh, that's too bad!" Johnny said quickly. "We'll keep you right here till you're better. You can't go up and down those hotel stairs with a bad ankle." He made introductions, then lifted her from the saddle and started for the house.

"Wait!" J.D. barked. "We'd best tell the news, Johnny. She'll want to celebrate with the rest of us. It seems that Johnny's got himself engaged today, Miss Devine. To Diantha here!"

Zoe's face paled and her eyes held pure fury as they met Diantha's. Only for an instant, then the actress in her came uppermost. "How sweet," she murmured. "Johnny's courtships are always so sudden—and so short!"

"Yes, they are," J.D. agreed. "Come to think of it, they are, by gum!"

Johnny looked at his father, his eyes puzzled again, but he said nothing; just started up the porch steps with Zoe.

Betsy followed to take off Zoe's riding boots, while Aunt Peg went for hot water. Pop led off the horses and Diantha discovered that she was alone with Johnny's father.

SHE WOULD have liked to run away, far away to some place where she could hide her dreams and cherish them. But she had never run from anything before, and she wouldn't now. When J.D. nodded, she followed him down to a clump of cottonwoods near the barn, where they were out of sight from the house. There he faced her.

"Well!" he roared. "What have you got to say for yourself—lettin' it go as far as an engagement?"

Diantha smiled innocently. "Johnny's nice, Mr. Wing. And you were wise to send me in time. He would most certainly have married Zoe Devine, and you wouldn't want that."

J.D. eyed her sternly. "You know the girl I want him to marry!" he retorted bluntly. "And you knew it would ball things up, havin' Johnny blurt out that way that you're engaged. Betsy's got a lot of pride, dammit—so much that she wouldn't marry Johnny at all, if she knew I was wanglin' it this way. And she won't take Johnny back so soon, neither, after hearin' he's engaged to you."

"Which is very well," Diantha said sweetly, "because—" she drew a long breath, then let him have it. "Because I don't intend to let her have Johnny."

"What!" he shouted. "Why, you female pirate! That was your agreement! For five hundred dollars you were to entice Johnny away from that actress, then give him the mitten. Well, you've hooked him all right. Now turn him loose—and take your five hundred and get out!"

Diantha shook her head. "You can keep your five hundred, Mr. Wing," she told him evenly, "because I'm not giving Johnny up. I love him, you see," her voice softer. "I didn't plan on that, but it happened. I love him dearly."

"Do you think I'll let you make a fool out of me?" J.D. roared. "And do you think Johnny'll marry you when he finds you were just a girl I hired to lure him away? When he finds you're the sort of girl who'd take a job like that, for pay? And don't think I won't tell him, young lady—for I will, dammit! I've got a copy of your ad, and the endorsed check I gave you for clothes. I'll just have to show them to Johnny, and then you won't have a chance to turn him loose. He'll do the job himself!"

Diantha felt the color drain from her face, and her heart was twisted in a new way. For the first time she realized, fully, the hurt that would come to Johnny. Oh, from the start she'd known there would be some hurt, but that was before she knew what love really was, how it took complete possession of you. For the first time she comprehended what it would mean to lose somebody you loved. And now for Johnny to lose her in this horrible, sordid way . . .

She couldn't have that. It wasn't only her own right to love for which she must fight now—but for Johnny's happiness as well. She looked at J.D., and knew that it would do no good to appeal to his sympathy. All the older man wanted right now was his own way. She had to fight with different weapons.

She said levelly, "And after Johnny turned me down—do you think he'd have Betsy? When he found you'd interfered in his life to the point of hiring a girl to break his heart, do you think he'd tamely let you have your way? You know he wouldn't. He'd probably marry Zoe Devine quickly, just to show that he was running his own life!"

The shot struck home. J.D.'s face sagged and he licked at his dry lips. "All right. We're at stalemate then. But I don't give up, so you'd better think it over, by gum. I'm givin' you just twenty-four hours to get through here and leave! If you haven't done it by then, I'll tell Johnny, regardless. I'll not let you cheat me!"

She looked at him, then slowly turned away, not trusting herself to further speech. From the house came Zoe's soft voice . . . and Betsy's. Diantha gave a mirthless smile. Three girls for Johnny, right here under the same roof! The other two thought Diantha triumphant, right now, not knowing that she had only twenty-four hours to live in Johnny's heart. Only one short day.

SHE WALKED slowly toward the house. Overhead, gathering storm clouds began to cast gray shadows over the world that had been so bright only an hour ago, and Diantha was filled with a loneliness as big as the earth and as dark as storm.

The storm clouds stayed overhead, laced with lightning and split by thunder, finally sending down rain upon the parched earth. Diantha's loneliness grew, too, and that was a strange thing, because Johnny was close, and he was so very gay.

The whole evening should have been gay, for Pop came in and told stories about the exciting rodeo life that Diantha knew so well. Aunt Peg brought out sweet cider,

and doughnuts, and everybody laughed as they ate . . . but under it all there was a tension.

Old Mr. Wing kept staring from under his heavy brows at Diantha, his gaze telegraphing her his constant warning; and Zoe sat very still, her eyes sultry whenever she looked at Diantha—sultry and shrewd, letting Diantha know she hadn't given up yet.

Only Johnny was happy—thoroughly and completely happy, and so sure that Diantha shared his joy. His brown eyes were alight with tenderness whenever he looked at her, and his hand was always reaching for hers. Constantly he made little opportunities for them to be together, inventing excuses to accompany her to the kitchen, the porch—so he could grab her in his arms and whisper, "My little wife-to-be! My own sweet darlin' dear! I love you so!"

There was ecstasy in Johnny's kisses, but there was pain now, as well, the sharp pain of wondering how she could ever live without him . . .

Finally, the evening drew to a close. Pop started to leave, but came back from the porch to say that the rain was pouring now, with all signs pointing to a long siege of it.

"So I reckon all hands had better stay close tomorrow," he added.

Johnny stood up, frowning. "That could easy mean a gullywasher up in the canyon!" he exclaimed. "With the ground as dry as it is, the rain won't soak in, but'll wash off the top. And Tricks is up in the canyon!" Then, after a moment's thought, "I'm goin' to ride up there first thing in the mornin' and get her, rain or no rain! She might get caught in the canyon, or if she comes up, I don't want her runnin' around without shelter."

He turned, grinning, to Diantha. "I'm crazy to ask it, I guess, but I was wonderin' if you'd like to wrap up in a poncho and ride through the rain with me? Get your first real glimpse of ranch life in the raw?"

"You're crazy!" Aunt Peg declared flatly. "No girl would want to, Johnny Wing!" And old J.D. jerked up his head to glare.

She shouldn't. Diantha knew she shouldn't—but with Johnny smiling at her, offering her a few more hours of heaven before the dark time came . . . how could she refuse? It would be something for them both to remember, always—even though they had nothing else.

"Oh, I'd love to, Johnny! Shall we start early?"

"At dawn," he agreed.

There was a gasp—from Zoe. For a moment Diantha got another glimpse of pure hatred in those sloe-dark eyes before the girl let her lashes droop. She put her hand to her foot as if pain had wrung the gasp from her.

Pop said, "I'll carry you to your room," and before she could protest, he lifted her up and went down the hall with her after Aunt Peg.

There was only a quick opportunity for another good-night kiss from Johnny—one that was heartachingly sweet because Diantha knew that by this time next night Johnny might not want to kiss her. Then she started down the hall to go to her own room.

Pop was waiting in the hallway. "Meet me in the barn soon as the folks are good 'n asleep," he whispered as he passed her.

Diantha nodded mutely. Pop had some other wild scheme up his sleeve—she knew the symptoms—but what did it matter? She couldn't sleep anyhow, not this night, and she might as well listen to what he had to say. He couldn't change things. She'd have those pitifully few hours alone with Johnny on the ride tomorrow, and after that . . .

"If only I could die!" she whispered fiercely.

CHAPTER SIX

Angel for Hire

DIANTHA WRAPPED a blanket about her to run to the barn, and when she got there, Pop took it, shook it free of rain and threw it over a stall gate. Then he stood before her, lighting a cigarette—with the flare of the match showing his face to be graver, older-looking.

"What are you goin' to do, Diantha?" he asked at last.

"I'm going with Johnny tomorrow," she returned low.

"And after that? You see, I was comin' back from the corral and I overheard most of your talk with Johnny's father. He just gives you till tomorrow night, baby. So when you come home with Johnny—what then?"

"I don't know, Pop! Oh, I don't know! I love him so . . . I'd rather die than hurt him!"

"Yet you're hangin' on till old J.D. spills out the truth!" Pop said sternly. "You're riskin' havin' him turn back to Zoe, just because he's so hurt and mad! And she's no girl for him, Diantha. I know. She's a bad one!

"You see," his tones sounded embarrassed, "when we were in K.C. some of the boys 'n' me used to visit a little night club across the river. There was a girl there—Zola Devine she called herself—and she wasn't any good. The boys talked about her. She'd been married three or four times, and each time it was to a man with lots of money who paid her off, afterward, because they found she was such a hell-cat. Her last husband was mixed up in a shootin', and this Zola was supposed to have somethin' to do with it, but she disappeared. And today I saw her out

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there, big as life and twice as devilish! That's why I was surprised to have you call her Zoe Devine."

"Oh!" Diantha gasped, remembering how scared Zoe had been at her false message at the dance—that a man wanted to see her. "Does she know you recognized her?"

"Well, no," he said. "And I didn't feel like a man ought to throw the past in a woman's face. That is, I didn't—until tonight, when I saw how she looked at you. When I carried her to her room, I told her to get away tomorrow or I'd spill the beans."

"You'll have to tell Johnny!" Diantha exclaimed.

"You don't know men, baby, or you'd understand why I can't. And you'd understand why it wouldn't make any difference to Johnny, the way he feels. No, we just got to get her out of here ahead of us—or with us. She can travel, all right. Her ankle ain't swollen a bit. That way, we may save Johnny from havin' her twist his life all up. But—there's still somebody else to think of. Betsy."

Diantha couldn't answer. Pop puffed at his cigarette in silence a moment, then he went on gently, "I guess it was bound to happen, baby—that we should bite off a bit more than we can chew. We've always gone headlong through life, plungin' into things without thinkin' it out first. Like me sockin' those men and landin' in jail, and like you takin' this job to get me out. We've both been that way, and now—I guess we've both taken a cropper. Cause I'm in this with you, honey."

Diantha's knees went suddenly weak. "Pop, what can I do?" she begged. "I do want those hours tomorrow, so I'll have them to remember later. When we come home, then I'll tell him that—that I don't love him."

"Could you do that, baby?" he asked. "After bein' with him? Could you make him understand?"

Diantha shut her eyes, thinking of Johnny . . . Johnny, with the laughing brown eyes, the tousled dark hair. Johnny, whose lips had transported her to the gates of heaven itself.

She whispered, "I've been selfish, Pop. I was ready to hurt him more than I needed to . . . I'll—I'll leave him to Betsy. He's fond of her, and—" her voice broke a moment, then she went on, "I won't go tomorrow, Pop. I'll send Betsy, instead, and we'll get out while they're gone. You and I—and Zoe."

"Yes, I'll guarantee that Zoe goes!" Pop's voice was grim. "We owe that to Johnny. And another thing—I'm tellin' J.D. where he can go with his five hundred bucks! I've got half a mind to paste him on the nose for gettin' a girl like you into somethin' like this! Well, there's a train leavin' town at eleven tomorrow mornin', and we'll be on it. My horses, too. We'll be headed for far places by the time Johnny gets back with the black mare."

Diantha was too benumbed to plan any more. "All right, Pop."

He held her against his shoulder a moment, then he wrapped the blanket about her again. "Just one more thing," he cautioned before she left for the house. "Watch out for this Zoe. When I told her she had to go, she said if she couldn't have Johnny, you wouldn't either. I told her to leave you alone, but she doesn't know you're my daughter, so my threat may not count for much. So watch out. She's the devil's own spawn!"

"I'll watch," Diantha promised vaguely, but she really didn't give heed to Pop's warning. Her thoughts were all with Johnny . . . remembering that this time, tomorrow night, she'd be going farther away from him each minute.

LYING WIDE awake in her bed, Diantha heard the rain slacken a bit toward morning. She heard, too, Johnny's spurs clinking down the hall as he tiptoed

to the kitchen, pausing for an instant outside her door—maybe to blow her a silent kiss. She heard him clattering around, and after a time there came the fragrance of boiling coffee.

Diantha lay there rigid, fighting the urge to go out and see Johnny once again, to feel his lips against hers, his arms about her. But she couldn't. If she did, she'd go with him to Weeping Rock Canyon and Johnny would be hurt more than he needed to be.

At last she heard him go outdoors and down the porch steps, and then she got up and slipped down to Betsy's room. Surprisingly, the red-headed girl was awake.

"I've been thinking things over," she told Diantha. "And I want to—"

"Never mind that now," Diantha said low. "Listen—I want you to do something for me, Betsy. Will you go to the canyon with Johnny this morning? I've got such a headache, and Johnny hates to take the trip alone . . ."

Betsy looked at her. "You *are* sick, Diantha! Let me do something for you!"

"No, thanks. All I need to do is go back to bed and sleep a few hours. And I can do that, if I know you're going with Johnny."

"Of course I'll go if it means so much to you," Betsy returned. "But Johnny won't be happy about it!"

"Make him as happy as you can, Betsy!" Diantha begged. "Please!" and she went back to her room.

From behind the drawn curtains of her window she saw Betsy struggle out through the thin rain, in boots, a drawn-down rubber hat and the poncho. She saw Johnny's head jerk up when he recognized Betsy. His glance went to the house and for a heartbeat Diantha thought he was coming back—but he didn't He lifted Betsy to the saddle and they rode away together. Johnny and Betsy . . . Not Johnny and Diantha. Never that again.

Diantha buried her head on the pillow for a wild instant, wanting to scream out her protest. And by the time she'd fought down her turmoil and looked again, Johnny and Betsy had disappeared into the gray mist of rain.

SHE GOT up and dressed swiftly, jerking on her clothes with trembling hands, throwing the few things that were her own into a bag. She wanted nothing J.D. had bought her.

Pop was already in the barn with the horses, saddling up, getting ready.

"Zoe'll go with us," he said grimly. "I went around to her window last night and told her. That is, I didn't tell her you was goin'—" with a dry smile. "I thought I wouldn't give her *that* satisfaction till the last minute. But I did say you were my girl, so she'd know I meant business.

"There she is now!" he nodded toward Zoe, coming through the rain, walking without a limp, her face white under the black shawl on her head.

Pop had already saddled her mount, and left it in the shelter of the shed. Now, without a word, without even glancing beyond to where Diantha and Pop stood in the morning shadows, Zoe climbed to the saddle, quirted the animal into a run . . . across the barnyard, down the lane.

"Guess she didn't want our company," Pop observed dryly. "Well, as long as she's gone and—"

"Pop!" Diantha gasped, catching his arm and pointing. "She's following Johnny and Betsy. No . . . she thinks it's Johnny and me! Pop, she's up to something bad!"

Diantha grabbed the bridle of the sorrel Pop had just finished saddling, and backed it around. Then she flung herself up. "I've got to follow!" she cried out. And then her mount, too, plunged out of the shed into the gray rain, to go pounding down the lane and into the canyon trail after the others.

It was the same trail over which she had gone with Johnny, only yesterday. It had been baked and cracked and rutted then, rising to a fine dust cloud behind them. Now there was water over everything, because the parched ground, almost as if it had refused to believe in the miracle of the rain, was slow to absorb it.

Diantha raised her head and tried to peer through the rain, but she could see nothing but grayness. There was nothing to do but ride blindly onward.

Minutes passed . . . miles passed. Her face and clothes were covered with mud, as was the sorrel's coat. Sometimes the animal slipped on the surface mud and only Diantha's firm small hand kept him from falling. Sometimes she thought he was veering from the trail, but knew it was better to trust his instinct rather than her own. And she was wise. At long last a horse nickered ahead . . . her own answered. She saw dark bulks in the mist and heard the roar of rushing water, and knew that the flooded canyon depths were close by.

She turned her horse toward those moving shapes. The roar of the water dinned in her ears and hid the sound of her approach. It must be the gullywasher Johnny feared—the water that poured off the dry ground into the canyon, sending the creek higher and higher, until it washed everything before it. Was Johnny down there?

Zoe's voice rose shrilly above the water's roar. "Call Johnny for me, Diantha!"

Before Diantha's horrified eyes the scene was suddenly clear. Zoe was pushing a poncho-clad figure toward the canyon's rim. *She thought Betsy was Diantha!*

Diantha cried out, "Betsy, no, no!" and quirted the sorrel straight toward Zoe, wildly hoping to push Zoe aside—push her off the cliff . . . anything! But it was too late.

Before even her cry rang out, Zoe had given Betsy a sudden push with both hands, and there was a quick, startled scream as Betsy went over the rim and down . . . down . . .

Diantha stopped her horse so suddenly he reared, and her eyes went wide, frightened. She knew what those gullywashers were like: torrents of raging water, up-torn bushes and trees, even boulders carried in their powerful current. A man wouldn't have a chance to swim through such as that, much less a delicate girl. And Zoe had known that—Zoe, who was already riding away into the mist and rain, thinking her revenge was done.

There was another shout then. "Betsy, I heard something!"

And Johnny came into sight, leading Tricks. Johnny was safe . . . but he'd be too late to save the only girl who'd be left to comfort him.

Quick as a flash Diantha whirled the horse in a circle, thankful that all her father's ring stock had been trained to follow orders, to take chances. The sorrel shied only an instant as he came to the rockrim . . . then he went on, gallant animal that he was. Over the edge and down, with Diantha gripping the saddle to stay in it. There was a sudden splash . . . the icy shock of the water rising around them.

SHE GAVE a gasp of relief as she felt the horse swimming under her, in hopeless struggle against the awful current—but swimming. At least, they hadn't struck any boulders. Clinging to the saddle horn, Diantha slipped free to ease her weight from the struggling sorrel, and to try to guide him to where a choked cry was calling for help.

Somewhere above those rainclouds the sun was rising, and a little of its light came through—enough for Diantha to glimpse Betsy clinging to a tree-limb. The current was carrying Diantha and the horse right toward it, but suddenly she saw the floating heavy tree-stub that would reach Betsy first.

Diantha screamed hoarsely as the stub hit Betsy and washed over her, and those limp hands loosed their hold on the limb. But as if by a miracle, the stub caught in the tree-limb, too, eddying slowly for an instant—and holding Betsy fast until Diantha came alongside, just in time to fling an arm under the unconscious girl's shoulders and carry her along.

The sorrel had stopped trying for shore now. He was struggling to keep his head above water as the current carried him—and the girls—to the lower part of the canyon, where great piled-up masses of jagged rock awaited them.

Then, when nothing but doom seemed ahead, when it was all but certainty that they would all be battered to death on those cruel rocks, a voice came straight and clear through the roar of the waters, the grind and clash of the rocks.

"Diantha! Hang on, darlin'!"

Diantha turned her head, and right then—as if to give her a last glimpse of Johnny, whom she loved so dearly—the clouds parted a little, letting down a shaft of light. Faint, but enough to see Johnny whirling his riata . . . and enough for Johnny to see them. Diantha cried out to the horse, and the animal jerked up his head just as the rope came down. The noose fell low enough to go over the horse's neck and shoulders, and about Diantha as well.

Another shout—Pop's. Another rope falling from another angle in the twisting canyon . . . and then the horse and his burden was being slowly drawn toward shore.

Johnny was in the water. Pop, too. She felt the strain on her arm ease as Pop took Betsy, and then Diantha herself was in Johnny's arms, being held close, while the horse scrambled to the safety of a ledge.

It was still raining, and the air was cool on her drenched garments, but Diantha had never felt so happy and safe in all her life before. Because Johnny's lips were so warm upon hers . . .

After a long time she remembered. Her eyes flew open. "Johnny, I've got to tell you—" she began. "I've been wicked, but I didn't realize how it would hurt you. Only I've been hurt, too, because I learned to love you so. You see, it was all a trick at the start—"

Swiftly, she told him everything, right from the beginning. Even about Pop. "You thought I looked like an angel, Johnny," she finished, "but I wasn't any angel. I was really a devil at heart, and—"

Johnny chuckled and his arms tightened. "Like Tricks! Guess I loved you for the same reason I do her—because deep down I knew you'd keep me guessin'." Again his lips found hers.

"But your father," she protested faintly, when the kiss ended. "He'll—"

"Secretly he's liked you all the time, and I know it!" Johnny told her. "It's just that he hates to admit he's been wrong. But I reckon he'll come to time when he learns that Betsy has ideas of her own concerning a guy back home."

"I tried to tell you in my bedroom before, Diantha," Betsy said.

Diantha looked up and smiled at Johnny.

"Want to hire an angel—permanent?" she asked pertly as she pulled his face down to hers.

Proposal

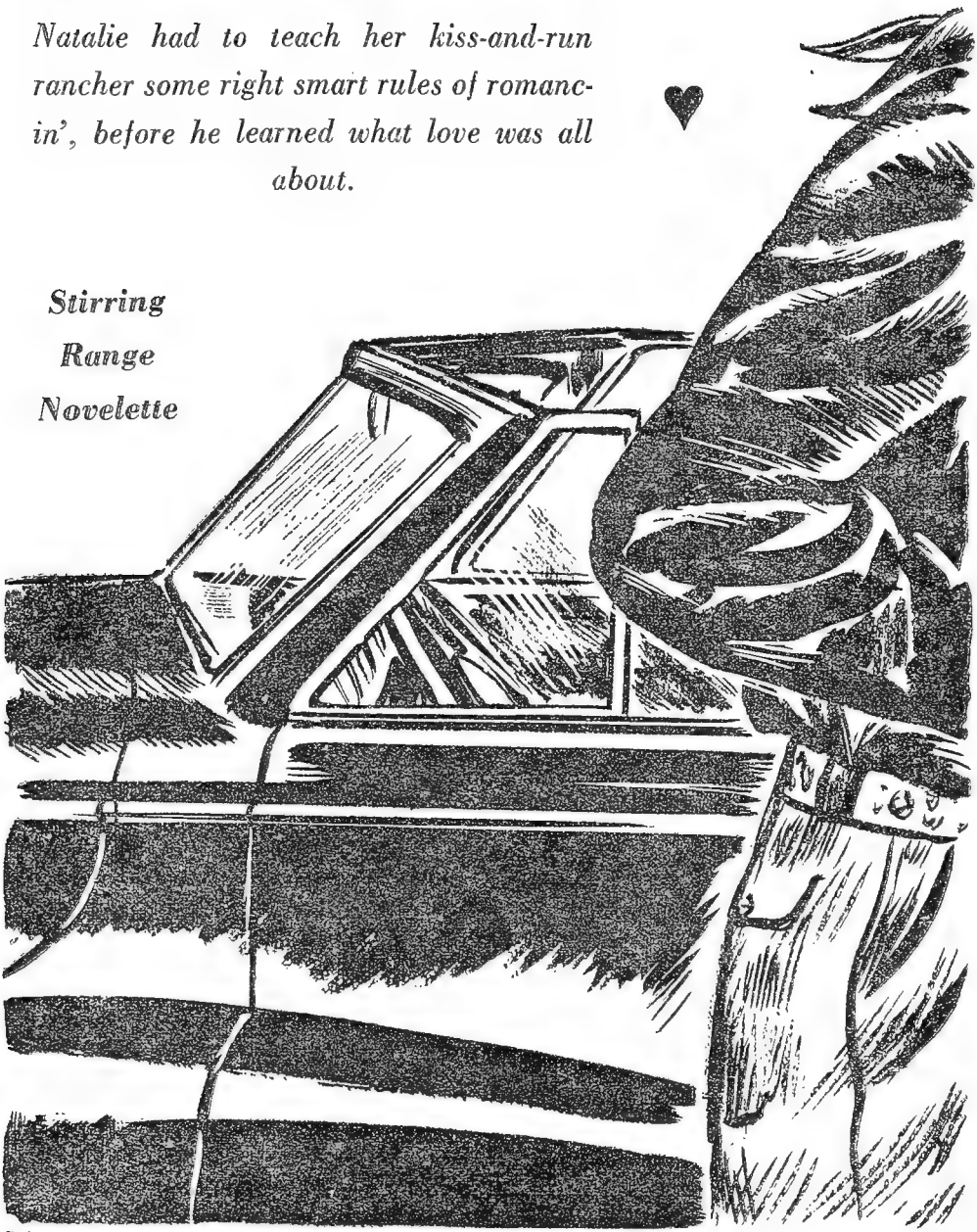
Stop twirling your Stetson, cowboy
Don't blush or hesitate
You'd better pop the question for
In Leap Year gals don't wait!

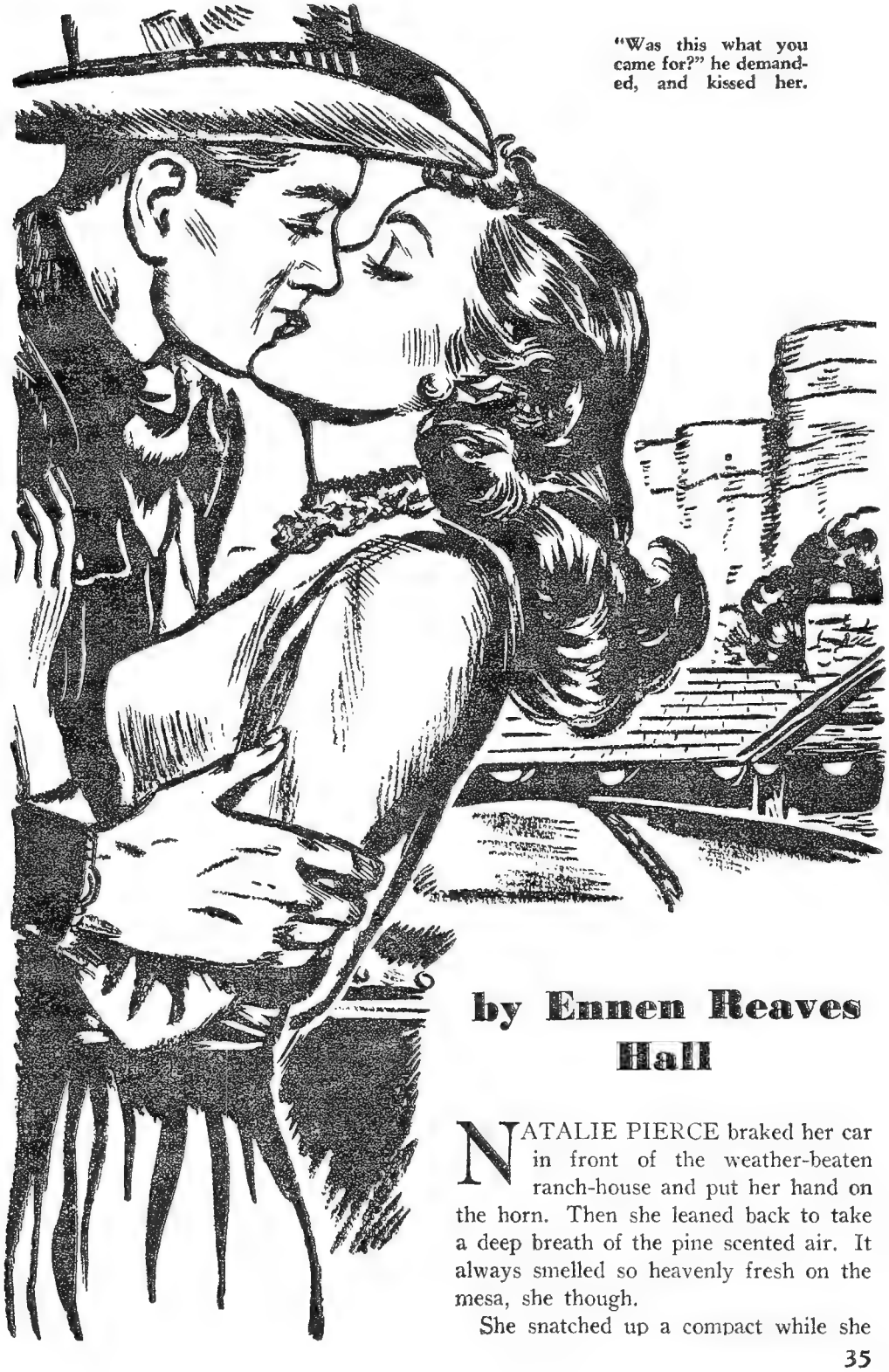
—Katherine Kelly Woodley

HOLE CARD FOR CUPID

Natalie had to teach her kiss-and-run rancher some right smart rules of romancin', before he learned what love was all about.

Stirring Range Novelette





"Was this what you came for?" he demanded, and kissed her.

by Ennen Reaves Hall

NATALIE PIERCE braked her car in front of the weather-beaten ranch-house and put her hand on the horn. Then she leaned back to take a deep breath of the pine scented air. It always smelled so heavenly fresh on the mesa, she though.

She snatched up a compact while she

waited, and running a powder puff over her face, surveyed herself in the mirror critically. Topaz-colored eyes stared back at her from under a riot of red-brown hair that the wind had loosened. She touched the puff again to the row of tiny golden freckles that marched across her slightly up-turned nose, but it didn't do any good. Those freckles, like character, couldn't be hid. Sighing, she put the compact away as a man started across the yard toward her.

Watching Blake Moseley, a thrill shot through Natalie. He was so good looking and virile in his arrogant way, with the broad shoulders and lean hips typical of the western Colorado rancher. If only he weren't so mule stubborn!

He came up to the car, smiling. But she didn't miss the wary look in his eyes or the stubborn lines about his mouth. Plainly, Blake hadn't changed.

"HI, PRINCESS!" He always called her that when she drove the car instead of riding. "Slumming again?"

Natalie swung the door open and stepped out. "Now, Blake, is that nice? A girl almost burns out her bearings climbing this mesa to see you and you start being sarcastic. I only came because—"

She stopped in confusion, unable to finish with his smoke-gray eyes watching her face like that.

"Yes?" he prompted. "Why did you come, Nat?"

When she didn't answer he reached out his long arms and pulled her into them, rough and quick.

"Was it for this?" he demanded, and kissed her.

For just a second Natalie stiffened in surprise. Then her lips took fire under his and ecstasy ran like flame through her veins. Blake Moseley kissed as he did everything else—with a confident ruthlessness little short of savage. He was so sure of himself—so very, very sure of himself.

The wistful thought had hardly crossed her mind when the kiss ended as abruptly as it had begun. Blake—just let go of her and turned away.

"If that was what you wanted, you got it," he said coolly. "So you might as well go now."

Natalie gasped as though she'd been slapped. To be so suddenly snatched up into heaven, then so rudely kicked out, was almost too much. For a moment she wanted to die of humiliation, then anger came to her rescue. She hadn't wanted to quarrel with Blake but if that was what he wanted—well, then, that was what he'd get!

He had already started off, so she had to hurry after him. "That wasn't what I wanted and you know it darn well, Blake Moseley! I wanted to try to talk some simple common sense into your stubborn head—"

He stopped and looked down at her, his eyes now like ice. "If by sense you mean sell Sky Acres, you can save your breath, Natalie. I've told you that before and it still goes. My father and his father owned this land before me and I'm not parting with it."

Natalie's thin patience snapped. "You don't mean *own*. You mean used! Actually you don't own a third of your range, Blake, and you know it. It's government land you hold under a cheap grazing permit, so you don't care how you abuse it. You've overgrazed for years until the land is utterly worthless and yet you persistently refuse—"

"That's my business," he interrupted, rudely. "And I don't need a bunch of fool turnip growers to tell me how to run it."

"It's our business, too!" she cried, hotly. "What affects your land affects ours. By overgrazing you've brought erosion and flood dangers to the whole valley. Just look at the big gullies every-

where! What do you think that means to us when water starts pouring down the mesa wall in the rainy season, washing away our rich soil and crops?"

He said tightly, "Why don't you move if you don't like it—instead of asking me to?"

"Our moving wouldn't change the picture. You'd still go on robbing the land of grass, and in time neither the valley nor the uplands will be worth anything. Land doesn't belong to just individuals, Blake. Can't you see that? It's everybody's, and for that reason must be protected—"

"Bureau propaganda," he said, shortly. "Put out by a bunch of guys in Washington who want to tell a man when to breathe. It's no use giving me that stuff, Natalie. I believe in every man for himself. I've never asked anything of anybody, except just to be let alone to run my own life."

"Your own life!" she mocked. "Grazing sheep and cattle on land everybody owns! Getting free range and water but refusing to care what happens to men whose taxes help provide that range. The growers in the valley have put real money into their land and into irrigation—and you think you've the right to set up here like some feudal baron and see them ruined? Just because your grandfather was a pioneer land grabber doesn't mean you can keep living in a kingdom all your own!"

"I'm doing all right." He was getting very angry, she saw, and realized with a sense of shock that they were quarreling bitterly.

She tried speaking more evenly and quietly.

"The other upland ranchers are all willing to sell or lease," she reminded him. "But it will do no good to idle the rest of the land if yours is kept grazed down. Sky Acres is really the key to the whole project. If you would just lease for ten years—"

She saw it was no use and defeat washed over her. Suddenly it was all almost more than she could bear. Not just the fact that failure of the valley bean grower's flood control project meant so much to her father and his associates. That was important; but even more important was the completely selfish stand Blake Moseley was taking.

Plus a delightful Cupid's caravan of Western stories by Marian O'Hearn, Ruby la Verte Thomson, Thelma Knoles and others—in the sparkle-filled June issue.

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When salty little Lynn came to town, the marshal got a beating, the boys got a laugh—and Lynn got kissed plumb dizzy by a suave Don Juan.

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On an impulse she moved closer. "Doesn't it mean anything at all to you what I want, Blake? Didn't—that kiss just now mean anything?"

He said, unsmiling, "I think it meant good-bye. We'll never see things alike, Nat."

He turned and walked away, in his quick, arrogant stride. That left Natalie nothing to do but leave, too. Because of the hot tears that blinded her she almost wrecked the car a couple of times driving back down the rough mesa road.

Tears of anger or hurt? She wasn't sure which. She'd almost thrown herself at Blake Moseley, and for a moment there in his arms, with his lips so hard against hers, she had been sure she loved him terribly. But wouldn't any girl feel like that with a man like Blake kissing her so savagely? And she couldn't actually be in love with a man whose principles she despised as she did Blake's. Rather, his lack of principle . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Kiss-and-Run Rancher

COMING IN sight of the valley again she was sure she hated Blake Moseley. Hated him for standing in the way of as constructive a program as the Deer Valley Associated Growers flood control project.

The valley was such a beautiful sight, with its miles and miles of young fruit trees and rich, level acres readied for spring planting of the pinto beans for which the area was already famous. "Turnip growers," Blake had contemptuously called the growers. Her heart hardened at the remembrance. No one knew better than he that the beans for which the Deer Valley soil had proved to be so well adapted were as paying a crop as his sheep and cattle any day. Provided, of course, that last season's disastrous flood was not repeated too often. Even floods could be controlled in time if Blake would accept the high price they were offering for his poor land and let them work out their government approved program of soil conservation.

The familiar black and white car of the Ranger Service stood before the pretty frame bungalow that was home to Natalie. Her spirits lifted a little. After Blake, Walt Nash's friendliness would be more than welcome.

He came across the yard to meet her, a striking figure in his neat uniform and broad-brimmed hat. "Better looking than Blake Moseley, really," Natalie told herself. "And a man to respect and admire." Yet, the thrill she had felt in watching Blake come toward her an hour ago was lacking now. That, she told herself firmly, must be because she knew Walt so well and knew that he would always play the part of a gentleman. And gentlemen were so often unexciting—

Ashamed of the thought, she smiled more warmly than usual at Walt and invited him to stay for supper.

Natalie's brother Bill came in right behind them. "Any luck with his nibs?" he asked, eagerly.

She shook her head. "He'd stay even if he was as hungry as his cattle looks." Then she added, bitterly, "He called us fool turnip growers."

Sixteen-year-old Bill started calling Blake Moseley a few names still less choice but Walt stopped him.

"Calling names won't get you anywhere, Bill," he said. "What Moseley needs is a fire built under him like they used to do for those stubborn Missouri mules."

"I wish I knew how," Bill said, hotly.

"Maybe I do," the Ranger hinted. "If he lost his grazing lease he mightn't feel so cocky. He hasn't land enough of his own to support a fourth his herds. These

ranchers couldn't get by with running this country if it wasn't for the government land they hold and use."

Virtually the same thing Natalie had told Blake an hour or so back. Yet, oddly, she didn't like the sound of it coming from someone else.

Walt and Bill were still in close conference when Natalie called them to supper. Her father came in and listened to Bill's report of her failure.

"Well, there's no law to make a man sell his home unless he wants to," he said, quietly, but Natalie caught the note of disappointment in his voice. "It looks like we might as well give up. The government men wanted action this spring."

"Maybe they'll get it," Bill said. "Spring ain't over yet, Pop."

An excited note in his voice made Natalie look at him sharply. She was in time to catch the glance that passed between the boy and the Ranger and to be puzzled by it. But she dismissed it quickly from her mind. Bill was impetuous but Walt would keep him in line. The kid was crazy about Walt and all his uniform stood for.

AFTER SUPPER, Walt lingered a while, then bid them good-bye. Natalie accompanied him to the car. When they were outside, he said quite suddenly, "Nat, are you in love with Blake Moseley?"

"Certainly not," she said, but not quite as sharply as she would have wished. "Why do you ask that, Walt?"

"Because I want you to marry me. You must know I'm crazy about you, honey."

Of course Natalie had known. Didn't girls always know things like that? Or—did they? Remembering Blake Moseley she wasn't so sure. She had hoped until today that he was crazy about her, too. Today she had found out he was just . . . crazy.

Walt had his arms about her, pulling her close. "Will you, Nat?" he begged.

It was healing salve for her wounded pride, hearing that note of supplication in his voice. And why not? she asked herself. Walt was everything she admired in a man. He commanded the respect of the whole valley and a girl should find it easy to love him. He wouldn't humiliate her and make her feel cheap and common as Blake had done. Impetuously she turned her head and gave him her lips in answer.

The kiss was vaguely disappointing. Not because Walt was lacking in ardor. He held her very close and kissed her long and passionately. Almost too passionately. Natalie freed herself as quickly as she could and pleaded a headache so he would leave.

Before he would go Walt had to tell his big news to Pop and Bill. They were so frankly pleased that Natalie tried to put more warmth into her good night kiss.

Yet it wasn't Walt's lips that she lay awake that night remembering. It was just because Blake had been so savagely rough, she told herself. He simply didn't know how to be the gentleman Walt was. She'd get over Blake and she'd start by genuinely loving Walt, she vowed over and over. Yet, her heart kept asking, could love be made to order like that? There just wasn't any answer . . .

A busy week followed. Natalie yielded to Walt's pleas for an early wedding and as news of the engagement spread over the valley there were parties for them and a round of gay festivities.

Through it all Natalie moved like a girl in her sleep. A constant war between her heart and her head went on, with neither winning. Sometimes she would be sure she loved Walt, that he represented everything she wanted in life. She would even find a momentary thrill in his kisses. Then suddenly everything would be flat, and she would wish the wedding was already

over. Once married to Walt, then she would be able to forget Blake Moseley . . .

AND THEN one day she looked out of the window and saw Blake dismounting before the house. At once her heart went out of control and started doing acrobatics. Her knees shook so, it was all she could do to open the door without betraying her emotion.

Blake looked angry. Brusquely, he asked for her father.

"He and Bill are in Cortez," Natalie told him.

His smile was thin and didn't reach his hard, angry eyes. "I rather expected that," he said, harshly. "And I bet I know with whom he's doing business there. Well, he and that two-bit government grazier ought to get along. They're both the shape of cork screws."

Sudden, swift anger made Natalie forget everything else. "You've no right to say that, Blake Moseley!" she cried. "Pop isn't crooked and you know it!"

"Then he hob nobs with thieves and you know the old saying about birds of a feather. It isn't exactly honest, I'd say, what they're doing to me. Two hundred sheep stolen night before last and at least three hundred run over the bluff and killed last night—"

Natalie recoiled in horror. "But you've no right to think Pop or any of the valley men had anything to do with it! They wouldn't—"

But she was remembering things that made her suddenly sick. The little hints Bill had been dropping about things turning out all right, the secretive way he made numerous telephone calls in a guarded tone of voice, the excited gleam of his eyes the past week. And Bill had been out for the past three nights until very late. Yet what was she thinking about! Bill was no thief . . .

"Somebody owes me about three thousand bucks." Blake was saying, tightly "And I just stopped by to leave word that I aim to collect. Either in money or hide, I don't care which."

He was turning away when Natalie found her voice again. "But why do you think we know anything about your stolen sheep? It's bad enough calling us turnip growers, Blake Moseley. But sheep thief is just too much!"

Blake didn't smile. He just stood there looking at her as though she were someone he'd never seen before.

"I don't believe in things just happening," he said. "So when I get notice the District Grazier is coming to tally my band right on the heels of losing five hundred head, I got sense enough to know what it means. That grazing permit I hold under the Taylor Act and that you seem to think isn't altogether honorable is about to be taken away from me. And in a way that I'd say fell far short of being honorable itself."

Natalie knew what he meant. If the grazier found Blake's tally short he could use it as a technicality for voiding his permit if he wanted to. Under the Taylor Act land was allocated according to the number of sheep a rancher grazed. As long as he maintained the average set the land was his to hold and use. Only the complaint of the District Grazier, reporting to the Advisory Board that the rancher was not living up to his agreement, could void the lease.

Suddenly Natalie was remembering what Walt had said the day she came back from Sky Acres. That Blake, like a stubborn mule, needed a fire built under him, and that if he lost his grazing permit he wouldn't feel so cocky. The thought that Walt might have had a hand in this, as well as Bill, was revolting. Walt was a Ranger, a man sworn to protect property and property rights! He couldn't be mixed up in sheep killing and stealing! Yet how well did she know Walt Nash, the man? she asked herself. Actually she

only knew the right things he stood for.

Blake was watching her, must have seen her mental distress. Abruptly he asked, his voice softening, "Nat, do you really love that guy? He isn't good enough for you."

Natalie stiffened, all her defenses going up. "Would I promise to marry him if I didn't?" she hedged. "And what has that to do with your sheep getting killed?"

"Just this," he said, slowly. "That guy has been after me for a long time. Longer than I've known you. If he's behind all this I'm going to skin him and hang his hide up to dry. But not if it hurts you too much. You may find that funny but I don't want to hurt you."

Natalie moved blindly toward him, almost against her will. "Blake . . ." she whispered.

He caught her close and kissed her, long and hard. And again ecstasy was like fire in Natalie's veins, tingling through her from head to toes. For a long heavenly moment she forgot everything —the humiliations this man had heaped upon her, her anger against him for his stubbornness, even Walt whom she was going to marry.

She was weak and trembling when Blake raised his lips from hers, took his arms from about her and stepped back. Once more his face was set and grim.

"You don't love him," he said, harshly. "You couldn't love one man and kiss another like that. So you can tell Walt Nash for me that if I find he's back of what's happened at Sky Acres he'd better start hunting a job, and somewhere else!"

He turned and walked to his horse, and Natalie stared after him, the earth falling away from under her feet. That was all Blake was going to say to her! After kissing her like that, after the way she had kissed him back, that was all he was going to say. He was just leaving, but she'd die before she'd call him back. How could a man be that stupid and cruel?

CHAPTER THREE

Lesson in Love

SHE WAS still nursing her bitterness when she heard a car drive up. Quickly, she went to the door, trying to hide the traces of tears on her cheeks. When she saw Walt she was glad. Now she would soon find out . . .

"Walt," she opened right up on him, "do you know anything about Blake Moseley's sheep being killed and stolen? He seems to think you do."

Walt grinned. "He'll have a hard time proving it," he said. "I was in Cortez last night and the other night, too. I've plenty of proof of that."

Suddenly all Natalie's vague suspicions crystallized. "Why would you need proof?" she demanded. "Surely no one would suspect a Ranger of such things."

"Well," he hedged, "everybody knows I owe him something. He's been trying to get me dismissed from the service for years. Who told you about the sheep, Nat?"

"Who told *you*?" she countered. "And do you know about the grazier coming to make tally at Sky Acres, too?"

"Sure, I know. It's a Ranger's business to know things, hon."

"It's a Ranger's business to protect life and public property," she said, steadily. "Not promote trouble and law breaking because of petty spite. Walt, this is going to ruin you."

"It's not going to touch me," he returned, confidently. "It may make trouble for Bill and the boys who helped him, but I'm in the clear. What are you beefing about, Nat? You wanted a fire built under Moseley and all I did was tell the kids how it could be done. When they learned how easy it was to get Moseley's

grazing permits they got busy. All I did was arrange for the grazier's visit and tip him off—"

"You mean buy him off!" Natalie said, hotly. She couldn't remember when she'd ever been so angry before. "What you've done is a monstrous thing, Walt Nash, playing on boys' emotions and inciting them to actual crime. It's worse than if you'd done it yourself! But don't think you're going to get away with it. I'm going to tell the Board myself—"

"You'll tell nothing." His face was suddenly hard and cold as he grabbed her by both arms, pulling her close against him. "You seem to forget your brother's in it up to his neck. You talk and he'll go to the pen for a good long stretch. I'm clear, I tell you. It's Bill who'll take the rap. His word won't count against me for he'll be a confessed thief. So you just keep your pretty mouth shut and let Blake Moseley lose his land. That's what you wanted, isn't it? He'll listen to selling talk, now."

Natalie could hardly believe this was Walt Nash talking. She was suddenly terribly frightened and sick at heart. For she knew he spoke the truth about what would happen to Bill if she interfered.

"You're horrible," she gasped. "You knew I didn't want it done that way. Neither did Pop or the other men. You've used a few susceptible boys to do your dirty work— I think I hate you, Walt Nash!"

She struggled to free herself but he only pulled her closer, his hands like iron bands on her arms.

"You love me," he said, softly. "Remember? You've promised to marry me and you're not changing your mind. Not unless you want to see the kid sent up."

She couldn't believe he meant it. How could he marry a girl who despised him so? But Walt didn't seem to mind about that. He pulled her closer and kissed her, hard.

"I'm crazy about you, Nat," he said, huskily. "You can't back out on me now. I won't let you. I'll make you love me—"

There was such a queer mixture of frightened whining and arrogant commanding in his voice that Natalie was suddenly no longer afraid of him. Only contemptuous. Plainly, Walt Nash was a man very unsure of himself. Only the hate he carried for Blake Moseley and the desire he felt for her were definite emotions in him. Yet a man as unstable as that was capable of carrying out his threats.

Suddenly it was all too much for Natalie. She decided to wait and ask her father's advice. Or maybe Blake's, for now she no longer thought of Blake as her enemy, a man who stood in her way. He was the man she loved, a man who was being framed. Between them they would find a way to show up Walt for good.

"Please go now," she begged. "I'll—I'll think about it."

"Think hard," Walt warned. "And remember what I said about Bill."

Not until he had gone did Natalie realize the wind had shifted to the north and the temperature was dropping fast. Gray clouds were scudding across the sky and piling up like dirty rags in places. The late spring storm they had been fearing was about to break and Natalie shivered as she felt the sharp chill already in the air. This had all the earmarks of a real blizzard.

THE SNOW started before night and she was relieved when her father telephoned from Cortez that he and Bill would wait until morning to come home. The highways would be dangerous.

Yet she prowled the house uneasily as darkness set in. Outside, the wind howled, driving snow and cutting sleet before it, but the storm inside Natalie was even worse. How could she prove to Blake

that she hadn't had any part in trying to break him, without giving away Bill's part in it? Bill was too young to realize the enormity of the thing he had done. And too young to be prison-branded, to feel the withdrawal of public trust.

It was so important, Natalie realized heartbrokenly, that people trust each other. Living in suspicion and distrust of others had made Blake so hard to reach, so granite-like. That mustn't happen to Bill. Yet how could she prevent it without being disloyal to Blake? Blake, who was fighting his own love for her! And fighting against his own better instincts. She understood that now.

Suddenly she couldn't stand it any longer. She simply had to talk to Blake, to hear his voice. Maybe there would be something she could say to him to show him how she felt, to break down the wall between them.

The storm was increasing in fury and she doubted that the telephone would be working. Still, she could try it . . .

The call to Sky Acres went through after a short delay but it wasn't Blake's voice that finally answered her. It was the worried one of his old Indian housekeeper.

"He not home," the woman said. "He go to watch sheep and not come back."

Natalie hung up, then went to the door and opened it. Wind and snow rushed in with such force she could hardly get it shut again. It was bitterly cold, she realized. Dangerous for man or beast caught out unprotected. Now a new fear for Blake was added to her other worries.

An hour later she called again and was told Blake hadn't come in. After that she called every ten minutes and by the time another hour had passed she was frantic. Something terrible had happened to Blake! He wouldn't stay out in a storm like this—unless he couldn't get back.

Just as she was trying to decide what to do, the telephone rang. When she

Love, Come With Me . . .

Love, come with me, riding,
Share the sweet night,
The clouds are in hiding,
The moon's silver bright.

The sage scent is heady,
The desert smiles fair,
Come love, make you ready
For wind in your hair.

Let the wide spaces beckon!
I'd ride endless miles
If I always could reckon
On winning your smiles.

There's a preacher could bind us,
Make you my dear wife,
And dawn, love, could find us
Corralled safe for life!

—Beatrice Munro Wilson

answered, the guttural voice of the Indian woman told her, worriedly, that Blake's horse had returned to the barn without his rider. They both knew what that meant. Blake was hurt, if not killed. And in that storm he wouldn't live long if he was unable to keep moving.

Natalie knew then what she must do. She started calling the valley growers, one after the other, explaining Blake's probable plight to them. They all agreed that a searching party must be organized, and she asked them to meet as quickly as possible at her house.

By the time they began arriving she had her own horse ready, with extra blankets and hot water bottles strapped behind the saddle. She was dressed as warmly as possible in some of Bill's heaviest clothing and the men looked at her in dismay.

"You're not figuring on going, Nat?" one of them remonstrated. "Pop wouldn't like that."

"Pop couldn't stop me," she said, firmly. When another man added it was too bad Walt Nash had gone back to Cortez because he would stop her, Natalie just closed her lips tightly and said nothing. Time enough for talking later.

IT WAS rough going up the mesa road in the howling storm. The wind was a monster demon fighting them every inch of the way and the cold bit deeper and deeper until Natalie had to fight the urge to lay her head down on the pony's warm neck and just go to sleep. But the ice in the snow whipping her face raw, helped keep her awake.

It seemed hours before they reached the top of the mesa and started covering Blake's range in ever widening circles. It was after Natalie had lost all idea of time or place, and was conscious only of the white world around them and the white heat of the cold striking deep into her bones, that they heard the faint sound. After a while it came again, plainer—a man's call for help.

They found Blake imprisoned in one of the deep crevices that criss-crossed his range. He had blundered into it in the blinding storm and had badly sprained an ankle. Unable to climb out he had settled down to wait until morning. Only the fact that the full force of the wind didn't reach him had kept him from freezing.

"At that, I doubt if I could have stuck it out until daylight," he said, later, when rescuers and rescued were being served hot coffee in Blake's living room by the smiling Indian woman. "I don't know how to thank you fellows for what you did for me."

His eyes met Natalie's and understanding flashed between them. "Maybe I do, at that," he corrected himself, slowly. "I guess the best way to thank you is to talk your own language. I've been saying I didn't care what happened to you, but you didn't let that stop you from coming to my help in a pinch. So you can have Sky Acres at your own price any time you're ready."

The men looked happy enough to shout. One of them cleared his throat lustily. "You won't lose by it, Moseley," he assured Blake earnestly. "There's lots of good range to be bought that hasn't been overgrazed . . ."

"I think," Blake said, watching Natalie, "that I'll settle down in the valley and grow beans. If Nat will teach me—"

His eyes were saying much more to her, though, and Natalie smiled back at him. "I'll teach you," she promised.

She wished the others would hurry up and leave. She wanted to find out what Blake had to say now, after he'd kissed her as only he could—and her heart had a hunch it began and ended with "I love you . . ."

MEET

Tula Vilena

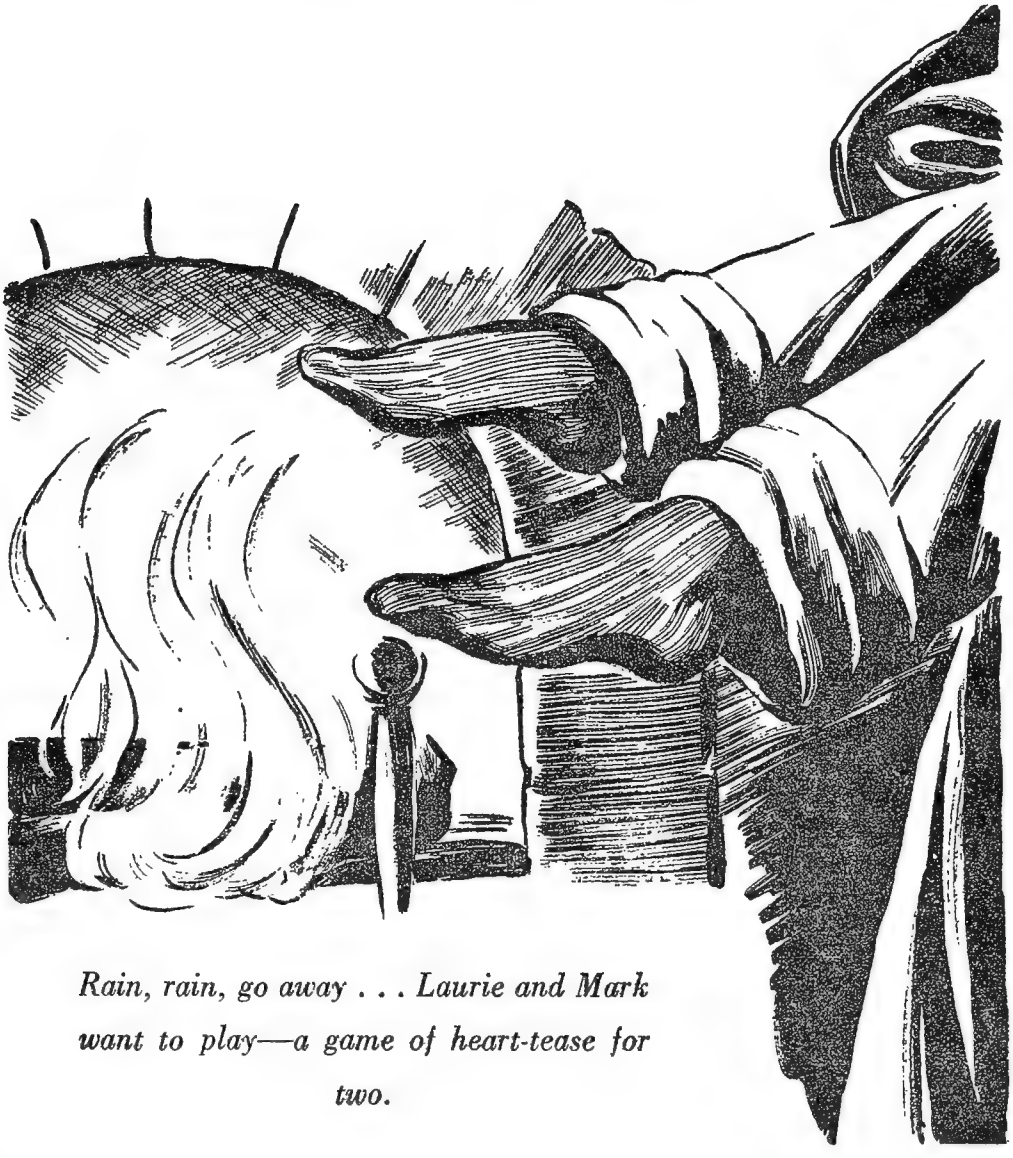
She's the queen of the carnival . . . the belle of Del Vista . . . the toast of the town. There's delectability in her smile and danger in her eyes . . . And she's the heroine of Marian O'Hearn's enthralling romance novel—BEYOND THE RED TENTS. It was a strange mission that took Tula south of the border, for in one man's power she found a peril she couldn't defy—in another's arms, a love she couldn't deny . . .

Meet Tula Vilena in August *Romance Western,* along with a raft of sparkling rangeland stories. It's out on June 18th.

STORMY-TIME SWEETHEART

by

Robert Turner



Rain, rain, go away . . . Laurie and Mark want to play—a game of heart-tease for two.

She closed her eyes, trembling a little as she waited for his kiss to burn her mouth.

THE SUDDEN storm came sweeping down from the mountains in a crashing, dark fury. Forked lightning raked across the sky and thunder echoed and boomed, while the rain drove across the rangeland in solid curtains of water. It caught Laurie Kane, full out in the open, with no protection.

She had seen the black clouds balling up over the hills but she was only a little over half a mile from the Barlow ranch and figured she could make that shelter before the storm struck. She had urged her horse into a full gallop and traveled like a rocket, but she lost the race. She was still a

quarter mile from the ranch when the first deluge of rain hit her.

Laurie slackened speed and resigned herself to her fate. In a few minutes, as she had expected, she was drenched and heartbroken. Here she had spent all morning ironing the new white silk shirt and primping and fixing her dark golden hair in a sophisticated, upswept hairdo that she thought would appeal to young Mark Barlow and not make her look too dowdy in comparison with ultra smart young ladies he must've known back East. And now the storm had undone all that work.

The blouse, as well as her fashionable divided riding skirt, were now a sodden, dripping mess, that clung chillingly to Laurie's lithe young figure. And to make matters worse, the fancy hairdo was now just a soggy clump on top of her head that let trickles of water down the nape of her neck.

But as she neared the Barlow ranch, Laurie's anger and dejection lessened. A slow smile broke out on the healthy, apple-cheeked loveliness of her face. This disaster could turn out to be a blessing in disguise, after all, she realized.

Before, she had planned only to stop off at the Barlow place to water her horse. She had *hoped* that she would see Mark there and get a chance to talk with him, and that *perhaps* she would be invited to stay for dinner that night. But those had only been wishes. There was no guarantee of their coming true. But now, Laurie realized, they would have to take her in until the storm stopped and let her dry her clothes. Maybe, if she said a few brief prayers, the storm would keep up for the rest of the afternoon and she'd *have* to stay there. With Mark . . .

Driving up to the low, rambling main building of the Barlows' small but prosperous spread, Laurie felt the pulse in her neck begin to dance. A flush of pleasant anticipation colored her cheeks and throat. All over her body nerve-ends began to tingle as she thought of being with Mark again after all this time.

IT HAD been six years now since the Barlows had sold their ranch and moved East. That would make Mark twenty-three. She wondered if he had changed much. She knew that she had. When last she had seen him, she had been an awkward, gangly-legged, freckle-nosed and stringy-haired kid, with just a hint of budding beauty in her figure and in the deep green depths of her eyes. Her figure had rounded out since then. The freckles had faded and the almost white, sun-bleached blondeness of her hair had darkened to a tawny gold. She hoped Mark would be pleased with the change in her.

He had never paid too much attention to her back then when they were both very young. At seventeen, Mark was already full grown and almost mature. Slender and tall and dark he was, with deep-waved, jet black hair and that wild, untamed look in his laughing dark eyes. Whenever Laurie and her father, Dr. Kane, who was an old friend of Mark's dad, went out to the Barlow ranch for a visit, the two youngsters got along fine together. Mark would try to tease her in his boyish way and try to outride her in races across the range on their ponies. Sometimes they would ride clear to the foothills of the nearby range of mountains and climb up the steep cliffs of the canyon. Laurie had never complained or resorted to tears when he'd beat her out at something or tease her, and she had won Mark's grudging admiration for that.

And Laurie had worshipped him. She would never forget the day that he broke the news to her that they had sold the ranch and were moving East. They had been standing at the top of a canyon cliff, quiet and tired after the long climb upward. The late afternoon sun was warm

upon their heads and a westward breeze caressed their flushed faces like gentle, soothing fingers. They were standing side by side and somehow their hands had met and clasped.

"You know, I'm going to miss you, stringbean," Mark had said softly. That was his pet name for her, then. She wouldn't have stood for anybody else to call her that, but with Mark, it was all right.

She'd turned to him and they'd looked deep into each other's eyes, and there was in Mark's an expression of tenderness that Laurie had never seen there before. "I'll miss you, too, Mark," she'd admitted.

His eyes moved over her, speculatively. "Y'know," he said, "I have a hunch that in a few more years you're goin' to be a beautiful gal. And since I won't be here, then, I want to be the first to steal a kiss from you."

Suddenly he bent his head and their fresh young lips met in a rush. His arms gathered her close to him and they clung together for a moment. There was a shyness and awkwardness in the first kiss and a sweet ecstasy that Laurie would never forget.

A few moments later, they broke apart and laughing off their embrarrassment, raced back down the side of the cliff to the ponies, tethered in the canyon below. All the way back to the ranch, Laurie had hoped that they would stop and Mark would kiss her again. He hadn't done that. But he'd done something nicer. He'd said:

"I'm going to write to you, Laurie. Every week. And some day, when I get through school, I'm coming back here to you."

Those farewell words and the memory of that one brief, childish kiss faded to the back of Laurie's mind after a few months, when she heard no word from Mark. And as the years went by, she had determinedly pushed all thought of him to the back of her mind. She told herself that she had forgotten Mark Barlow.

THE PROMISE of beauty Mark had seen in her had become fulfilled and Laurie had become the belle of the small cowtown where they lived. She was the life of every dance, every party. But none of that really meant anything to Laurie. She was just passing time, trying to substitute excitement and a variety of beaux for the deep inner sense of loneliness that she'd suffered since Mark went away and never even bothered to write her.

From time to time, old Doc Kane received letters from Mark's dad. Once, after reading a page, he looked over at Laurie and shook his white-haired head.

"Old man Barlow's boy is givin' him fits again, Laurie," he said. "He's a real wild one, Barlow says. Gettin' into one scrape after another—women, fightin', liquor." Dr. Kane sighed then and chuckled a little. "Remember goin' through that stage m'self when I was a young buck. Don't mean nothin', really. The boy'll probably settle down and wind up as fine a man as his Paw. He's just sowin' a few wild oats. Goin' over fool's hill, we used to call it."

"Really, father?" Laurie said, with lifted eyebrows and what she hoped was just the right amount of indifference. But then she caught her father staring at her speculatively and knew that he had noticed the sudden trembling of her fingers at her mending and the sudden rise of color to her cheeks, at the very mention of Mark's name.

A month ago, she'd heard that the Barlows were coming West, and had bought back their old spread. The only thing that spoiled her happiness at the news was that Mark wasn't coming with his father, right away. He was finishing up at college and

had about a month more to go. Never had thirty-one days gone so slowly for Laurie.

Now Mark was back though, and she was going to see him. But as she drove the last few yards up to the ranch-house, Laurie remembered the gossip she'd heard this morning, about Mark Barlow's arrival last night.

He'd gone stright down to The Flats, the town's largest and wildest saloon and gambling casino. He'd taken too much to drink and lost a lot of money at the gaming tables and become involved with one of the hostesses at the place. There had been a couple of fights, too. Mark Barlow's arrival from the East had caused a stir, all right.

Laurie's friend, Katie Martin, who had come running over to tell her about it, first thing, had rolled her dark and dreamy eyes.

"They say he was just—just terrible, Laurie!" she whispered. "He—he was actually *reeling*. And this blond little good-for-nothing gal—such carryings on there was between those two! I heard tell he kissed her and hugged her, standing up on the bar before all those people. He must be absolutely wild, Laurie!"

"Yes," Laurie had murmured. She could picture Mark doing something like that. She could almost see the daring, impudent flashing of his eyes and hear his crazy ringing laughter . . . All the breath seemed to catch in her throat at the memory of him. "Mark—always was a wild one."

"So handsome, too, I heard." Katie whispered, grinding the knife deeper. "All the women are carzy about him. Why, I heard tell that it was the sheriff's wife who interceded and kept him from getting thrown in jail. They say he just smiled at her and she begged her husband not to arrest him! Honey, I'm afraid you wouldn't have a chance now, with a man like that. After all, Laurie, he's been away to college in the East. He's not going to want to bother with any poor little countrified small-town girl like—"

Laurie had wheeled on her friend angrily. "Hush!" she'd cried. "I—I don't want to hear any more of your gossip!"

NOW, OUTSIDE the Barlow ranch-house, as she tethered the team to the hitching rail and ran up onto the verandah, her knees were so weak she could hardly stand. Maybe Katie was right and she'd been a fool to come out here. But she'd *had* to. She'd *had* to at least look at him once more, be close to him for a little while, hear him talk, watch his smile.

The storm had settled down now to a steady pouring rain. Laurie was drenched, soaked through and through. Like a little drowned rat, she thought, ruefully.

She knocked on the door and when nobody came, stood there listening. But there was no sound from within the house. She smeared rain from her forehead with the back of one hand, and pounded on the door with her fist, again. Still, nobody came. The house was empty. They must all be out.

Laurie half turned and started off the verandah. But then she looked at the teeming, slanting rain, and felt herself shiver a little. She was beginning to get a chill from her soaked and clinging clothing.

"I'll be hanged if I'm going to take that long ride back to town in the rain," she told herself. "I'd get my death of cold. I'm sure the Barlows won't mind my using their house as a shelter while they're not here."

She tried two of the windows on the verandah, and finding the second unlocked, climbed into the crudely but comfortably furnished living room of the ranch-house. Soon she had a roaring fire going in the old stone fireplace. She stood in front of it and took down her hair,

fluffing out the golden abundance of it in the warmth of the blaze.

After a few moments, she went upstairs and into a bedroom. In the closet, she found an old checkered hunting shirt and a pair of tan trousers. She could tell by the size of the shirt and the faint, mannish scent of pipe smoke about it that it was Mark's. Swiftly she stripped off her soggy blouse and skirt, and after toweling herself dry with the shirt, put it on and stepped into the trousers. The clothes hung on her voluminously and she had to roll up the bottoms of the trousers and the sleeves.

She picked up her wet things then and went back downstairs, where she hung blouse and skirt over a straight-backed chair by the fire to dry. She was standing in front of a wall mirror, fluffing out the long wildness of her still damp and tousled hair and thinking that the out-sized man's shirt and trousers she wore didn't really make such an unattractive outfit after all—when the front door slammed open.

Laurie pivoted and saw Mark Barlow standing there. He was wearing a poncho, sleek black and running with rain water. His short-clipped black hair was wet and curly. Looking at him, Laurie took a deep breath and held it, and her heart hammered against her ribs until she thought it would burst out. For Mark had changed, too.

He was even better looking then ever, an inch or two taller, and he had filled out. His shoulders almost blanked out the doorway against which he stood. His dark eyes still held that wild, devil-may-care look, but in addition there was now a sort of nonchalant, worldly expression in their depths, too. The only signs of last night's episode in town, were a slight discoloration on one cheekbone and a scratch on his square chin, which merely added to the altogether breathtaking, rakish handsomeness of him.

Laurie recovered some of her aplomb. "Well," she laughed, "it's a good thing you didn't come busting in like that a few minutes ago."

She glanced at the wet clothing draped over the chair, fixing a roguish, provocative look on her face, and hoping that it would give her a sophisticated, wise expression. Then she turned to Mark and let her eyes roam over him in bold, obvious interest.

Mark looked toward the wet clothes she had taken off, too. He looked startled for a moment, then walked slowly toward her.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "You look familiar but I can't quite place you. Where do I know you from? What are you doing here, anyhow? How did you get in here? What—"

"Whoa!" she laughed. "One question at a time. So you don't remember me,

Edward Mann*

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Mark? Your memory isn't very good, is it? Or is it that hangover you must have?"

He stared at her some more, squinting his long, narrow dark eyes until they crinkled at the corners. "I reckon so," he said, haltingly. "Because I can't seem to remem—"

He broke off then and snapped his fingers. "Yeah," he said. "Last night. It—it must be that. The blonde from the saloon—I don't remember too much about it right now, but that's who you must be. I don't know any other pretty girls in these parts. You see, I've been away and—"

"I know," Laurie cut in, her eyes sparkling mischievously. She wondered what would happen if she continued to let Mark believe she was the girl he'd been with last night. A little thrill chased through her at the boldness of the idea. "So you still think I'm pretty. I—I was afraid you might have changed your mind."

His eyes ran over her, swiftly, appraisingly. "You're plenty good to look at all right. Let's see. . .Ivy, your name was—something like that, wasn't it?"

When she didn't answer, he went on, "All right, Ivy, answer my other questions."

She told him, then, how she'd gotten caught in the rain and had been afraid of catching cold and when she found nobody at home, had climbed through the window. While she talked, he slipped off his poncho.

"You've sure got your nerve with you," he said, a little coldly. "But that doesn't tell me why you came out here from town in the first place."

"Well, I—uh—you see," Laurie began, searching for a plausible reply. Finally she blurted out, "My bracelet! Yes, that was it. I—well, I came out to get back my bracelet."

"Bracelet?" he repeated, dumbfounded. "What bracelet are you talkin' about?"

"I can see you don't remember much about last night at all, do you, Mark?" Laurie said, smiling teasingly.

He shook his head. "Hardly a blessed thing." He put his fingers up to his temples and squinched his eyes shut. "You've got my head bursting again. What—what about this bracelet?"

"Well," she fibbed, "it was just a plain gold bracelet. But you insisted on taking it as a symbol of our—our undying love!"

He looked so crestfallen that for a moment Laurie felt thrusting pangs of guilt. But just as she was about to confess her hoax, Mark spoke up again.

"Look, you can't stay here, Ivy. Forget about the bracelet. If I took it, it must be around here somewhere. I'll look for it later and when I find it, bring it into town to you. If it doesn't turn up, I'll pay you whatever you say it was worth."

He bent forward and stared straight into her eyes, his own narrowed almost to slits. Laurie had to glance away under the steadiness of his stare.

"You know what I think?" he said, suddenly. "I think you're lying. I don't believe there was any bracelet. But it makes a good story and it's served its purpose. I'll give you a hunk of cash the first of the month, when I get my allowance, if you'll breeze out of here, now, pronto, before the old man gets back. He's been biting my head off all day about last night's escapade, as it is. Go on, now and be a sweet little honey and get out of here. You can have those old clothes you're wearing, but take your others with you. I'll see you in town the end of next week and maybe a little cash will salve your broken heart or pay for your lost bracelet or whatever you want to call it."

SOMETHING ABOUT Mark's patronizing manner when he said that, got under Laurie's skin. Now, she deter-

mined to teach Mark a lesson. He'd gone just a little too far to think he could get away with that with her—even if he did have her pegged as some abandoned little hussy from the town saloon, a plaything of the evening, to be discarded the next day.

She drew herself up haughtily and her eyes seemed to snap green fire. "You're not going to treat me like that, Mark Barlow," she said. "You're not going to be rid of me, that easily. In the first place, it's still raining cat-and-dogs. I'd be drowned again before I got a hundred yards."

He looked back over his shoulder and out the window, at the rain that was still coming down in bucketfuls. He groaned and put his hand to his forehead again.

"Besides—" said Laurie, folding her arms over her chest, "I kind of like it here. It's sort of—well, cozy. Just the two of us, alone in the house, with a nice warm fire blazing in the hearth, the rain beating on the roof . . . Listen to it, Mark."

He moaned again and didn't look at her. "I—I can't," he said, painfully. "I can't hear anything but the tom-toms beating inside my skull."

"Poor Mark," she said, with sudden pity. "Maybe I can fix up your headache for you. Some cold, damp cloths on your forehead might help." She took his hand. "Come over and lie down on the settee for a while."

He shook her hand away, angrily. His face grew red and temper flared in his eyes. "Listen, Ivy," he raged. "You're not getting away with this. The old man's liable to come back any minute. We were over visting a neighbor and saw the smoke from our chimney. They sent me back to investigate. You're going to get out of here, if I have to carry you out and put you on that horse myself."

Laurie put her hands on her hips. A roguish smile dimpled her cheek. "You're so masterful, Mark," she said, breathlessly. "That's what I like about you. I *dare* you!"

"Why, you—you little imp!" he roared.

He bent abruptly, and gathered her up off the floor into his arms. Laurie just squealed and threw her arms around his neck, burying her face against the warmth of his throat.

"You're so strong, Mark!" she breathed, hugging his neck with all her might.

When he looked down at her, she suddenly turned her face up to his. Their lips brushed and Laurie could feel his arms tighten about her. She closed her eyes, trembling a little in a moment of tense, maddening expectancy, as she waited for his kiss to burn her mouth.

But it didn't happen. Instead, he set her back down on her feet, his eyes glowing like hot coals.

"You cute little vixen!" He broke out into a broad grin, He put his hands on her shoulders and shook her gently. "You knew very well that I could never carry you out without kissing you, didn't you? And that once I kissed you I probably wouldn't be able to send you away."

He stepped back from her a little and let his glance travel over her again. The bagginess of the too-large men's clothes that she wore, somehow did not completely hide the firm roundness of her figure. It merely made it more subtly alluring. And there was something about the way her now almost dry, dark golden hair cascaded loosely about her shoulders, that was more intriguing than if she had spent hours fixing it up.

"You are a lovely little trick," he said. "No wonder I stayed in that place too long last night and drank too much. I've known hundreds of girls like you, baby. But this is the first time I've ever met one the next day and could look at her without wincing."

He walked over to the settee then and sprawled his long, lean figure out upon it. "All right," he said. "I reckon you can begin your treatment of my headache, honey."

Laurie smiled and pulled a chair over beside the settee. She put her hand upon Mark's broad, high forehead. "Maybe I won't need the cold damp rags," she said, gently. "Perhaps my fingers will be cool enough."

He closed his eyes as her long, cool-tipped fingers softly caressed his warm forehead. "Yeah, honey," he murmured. "That's fine, just fine."

OUTSIDE, THE wind blew rain against the windows in a sudden gust of fury and the sound of it was like tapping hands. The hearth fire flared and crackled and popped out sparks, the reddish glow of its flames falling over them, making flickering shadows about the room.

Laurie looked down at Mark's handsome features, now softened and gently highlighted by the flame-glow. His hair was so dark and tousled, like a little boy's . . .

Her reverie was interrupted as Mark suddenly reached up and took her hand from his forehead. He brought it down to his mouth and gently pressed the palm to his warm lips. A delicious thrill-shock ran up Laurie's arm at the instant of contact, seemed to permeate her whole body like the inner glow of a glass of wine. She held her hand tight to his mouth for a moment and then she slid off the chair to her knees, there beside him. She put her arms around his neck and pressed her cheek against his.

"Mark, oh Mark!" she murmured. "I—I can't help it, Mark. I'm ashamed of myself. I know you think I'm no good and just a—"

He didn't let her finish. He reached up and cupped her chin with one hand and brought her face down to his. His lips closed hard against hers . . . stayed there.

Laurie felt herself go weak and she would have sunk to the floor if his arms hadn't been around her, holding her. His kiss seemed to take all the strength from her but she didn't care. She didn't want it to stop. She wanted it to go on and on.

It didn't though. It ended very abruptly as the door burst open again and there was the sound of a sharply indrawn breath. Laurie and Mark broke apart. Laurie leaped to her feet. Mark came up off the couch like a jack-in-the-box and they both stared gape-jawed at the young woman who was standing there, looking at them, just inside the doorway from the verandah.

She was almost as young as Laurie and nearly as pretty. She was tall and slender, in the yellow slicker that covered her riding clothes.

"Well—" the newcomer said. "What's this, Mark? What's going on here?"

"I—" Mark spluttered and fumbled for words but couldn't seem to get them out. "Well, you see—uh—Ruth, it's this way. I—"

The girl called Ruth tapped one foot impatiently as Mark's words trailed off. "Yes, Mark, go on," she said. "You were saying—"

But Mark just looked blank.

In desperation, Laurie finally blurted, "Mark, who—who is this woman? Do you know her?"

Before Mark could answer, Ruth said, "I'm Mrs. Barlow. Now suppose you tell me who *you* are, young lady, and the introductions will be complete."

LAURIE FELT her stomach turn over. There was suddenly a terrible bursting pain around her heart.

"*Mrs.*—Mrs. Barlow?" she repeated, dumbfounded. Tears began to sting her eyes. "Oh, I see. Mark, you're married!

You brought a wife back with you. Why didn't you tell me—"

Suddenly, she broke off and wheeled on Mark, her eyes fiery, her cheeks crimson. "You brute!" she cried. "Letting me kiss you, letting me make a fool of myself! You two-timing, rotten scoundrel!"

She swung her arm and caught him across the cheek with a stinging slap. Then she raced toward the door.

Ruth tried to stop her. "Wait a minute!" she begged. "You can't—"

"Leave me alone!" Laurie told her, knocking her hand away. She flung open the door, raced across the porch and through the beating rain toward her horse.

The next minute she was heading back to town at full gallop. The rain drove full against her now, stinging her face like pellets of hail, and soon she was once again sopping soggy wet. The rain got into her eyes, too, but she didn't care. They were full of tears, already.

Laurie was so wrought up, so sunk in despair, that she didn't hear the pounding of a horse's hooves beside her until it was too late. When she finally turned, the rider, now racing close alongside, reached out with one arm, circled her waist and pulled her off onto his mount.

As he reined in, Laurie began to kick and squirm. She continued to fight him and beat at his back with her tiny fists, as he swung down off the saddle.

Mark kept saying, "Easy, honey, easy!" And finally she was so exhausted, she had to stop fighting against him.

He held her more gently then and whispered, "That's more like it, Laurie, darling. That's more like my precious stringbean!"

At the sound of that pet childhood nickname, Laurie looked up at him in astonishment. "You called me— Mark, you know who I am! How did you know?"

He laughed. With one hand, he pushed the long soaking wet hair away from one of her ears. His fingers touched a mole almost hidden beneath the lobe.

"You have a little heart-shaped birth mark under your ear, there," he said, chuckling. "You had me fooled, Laurie, for a while. I really thought that you might possibly be Ivy, the girl I met last night. Until I picked you up in my arms, that first time, back there in the house and saw that tiny mole up real close. Then I knew who you really were and that you were just trying to hooraw me."

"THAT DOESN'T change the fact that you made love to me, Mark!" she cried. "And you a married man. Mark, how could you do it? *Why* did you?"

He was still smiling. "That was my revenge, honey-child," he told her. "I was just getting even with you for teasing me. When Ruth started to explain to you that she wasn't *my* wife, but my cousin, Art Barlow's, I just winked and gave her the high sign, behind your back, to keep quiet . . . You see, Laurie, we brought Art and his bride here from the East. They're spending their honeymoon here, with us."

"Honeymoon," Laurie echoed, almost reverently.

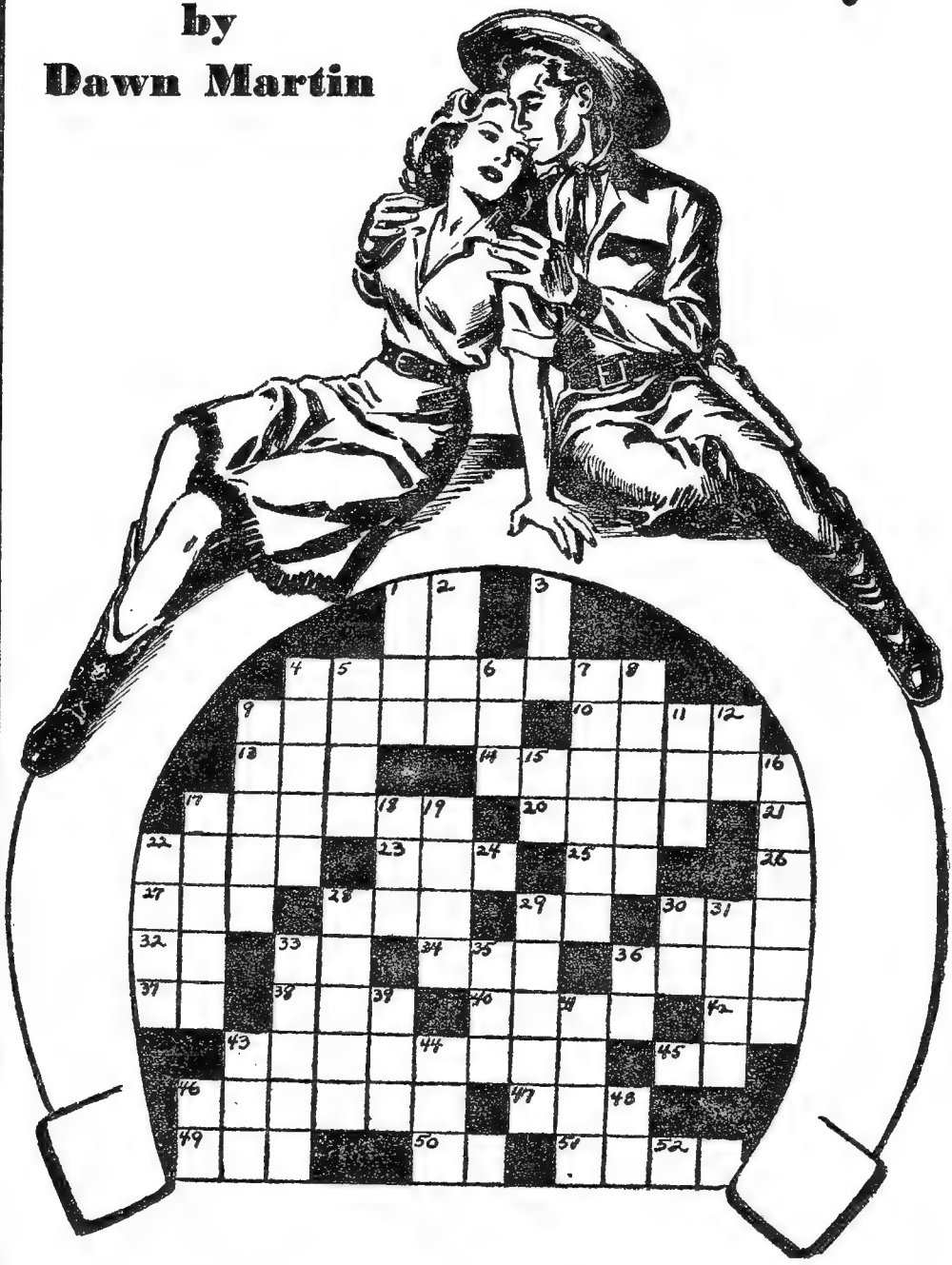
"Yeah," he said, holding her close against his chest, so that she could feel the pound of his heart, blending with her own. "That word has a nice sound to it, doesn't it? Y'know, I've been watching those two. It—it's sort of got me, made me jealous and unhappy, seeing them both so contented. Last night was my last fling, Laurie. I'm ready to settle down now. How about you, stringbean?"

She said, "What do you think, Mark?"

And then their lips came together again.

Lingo

by
Dawn Martin



Roundup ★ ★ ★

Things are hummin' again down at the crossword corral, so hang on to your sombreros and don't let a definition throw you. Fill in the horseshoe and win your spurs at some plumb pretty puzzlin'. And a dude might take a gander at the answers on p. 65—but a word wrangler never!

Across

1. Serves as unit of measurement
4. Unmothered calf
9. An inn
10. Greases
13. Anger
14. Heat with these
17. Rabbits' table d'hôte
20. Consequently
21. Letter for two
22. A sharp-prowed skiff
23. Covered moving wagon
25. Used in a comparative
26. Eighteenth letter
27. State's name, meaning "Here we rest" (abbr.)
28. Eager beaver's hobby
29. Remember the ——amo
30. Garden gadget
32. In this manner
33. Formal association (abbr.)
34. Flowing back of tide
36. Little devils
37. Measured by a glass (abbr.)
38. Slang term for Confederate
40. Lends a hand
42. You are (Fr.)
43. What's happening on our cover
45. Use this article before vowels
46. Imported Spanish custom
47. A spike of corn
49. Football player
50. Initials of a Dickens novel
51. Sound of a bell

Down

1. We share this ancestral mother
2. Briny deep (Fr.)
3. Jumbled type (Greek letter)
4. Need two people to do this
5. To declare positively
6. Royal Navy of Britain (abbr.)
7. Opera house of range
8. Their unemployment rate is rising
9. Lofty headdress
11. He roars at movie audiences
12. The elder (abbr.)
15. Vowel combination
16. To place great weight on
17. Girls still do this when kissed
18. Seedcase of future life
19. What barnyard fowl are
22. To run for it
24. One of the four compass directions (abbr.)
28. All ranch hands should be this
29. Stand firm
30. His Majesty (abbr.)
31. The wide —— west
33. Code of belief
35. Woolie's lament
36. So be it
39. To make a wager
41. Parties across are this to each other
43. It's a —— to tell a lie
44. A horseshoe wearer
45. Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter
46. Prefix meaning apart
48. Smallest state in the union (abbr.)
52. In common: no new news

by
Thelma Knoles

She was caught in strong arms, and her eyes opened wide to meet Nick's concerned gaze.

IT HAPPENED AT HIGH MESA

When adorable Audrey tried to spur on a too-cautious Casanova, she nearly rode high-wide-'n-handsome for heartbreak.

AUDREY BRENT was happily aware that Nick Sanders had deliberately maneuvered to be alone with her for the first time in her two weeks' stay at his High Mesa Ranch. Maybe the new blue satin shirt that matched the deep azure of her eyes had something to do with it. Or the way her short, fringed buckskin skirt flared about her slim figure. Or the way her brown hair rippled loose on her shoulders this evening.

Anyhow, here they were, walking down the lane away from the ranch-house, with the cottonwoods rustling like tiny angels' wings above them, and Audrey feeling like she was floating straight into Paradise. She closed her eyes against the clear-cut wonder of Nick's brown profile and fair hair against the sunset, to imprint the picture forever on her heart. And at that moment his hand closed on her arm.

"Audrey," he said huskily, "I wanted to speak to you about something mighty important."

"Yes, Nick," she said softly.

She turned and lifted her starry blue gaze to meet his. And was lost in the changing depths of his clear-gray eyes. She caught a fleeting expression of tenderness. Then a sudden warm dancing glow like twin candles taking fire.

His hand on her arm tightened. Audrey felt a pulse beat wildly in her throat. She trembled, and knew that he was aware of the excitement coursing through her.

With a broken sigh Nick swept her into his arms. Some detached part of Audrey laughed softly, tenderly. Nick had no need of words. His eager kiss on her lips, his arms holding her breath-takingly close spoke for him. Then she lost the last shred of detachment, and was whole-heartedly returning his kiss.

But too soon, Nick was slipping his arm through hers and resuming the walk down the lane. Audrey walked in a daze, her cheeks glowing rose and her eyes misty with dreams.

They came to the end of the lane, rounded the line of cottonwoods and stood looking down into a grassy little hollow. The overflow from a watering tank kept the spot green. A big slab of granite made a natural seat against the slope. The stone seat was occupied by two people. They made a striking picture, with their sleek black heads so close together. The girl's

coiled braids were set off by a red ribbon. The man's head was a cap of ebony waves above a gaudy shirt.

"Why," Audrey exclaimed, "there's Swing Britton with Ethel!"

The wind that came up every evening when the sun went down blew her words over her shoulder, so that the couple below didn't hear. The same soft wind carried Swing's voice plainly to the top of the low hill where Audrey and Nick stood under the cottonwoods. Swing was crooning a love song, his voice low and intimate. Ethel was giggling appreciatively.

Audrey smiled and glanced up at Nick. "You know, Swing just came from a vaudeville circuit. We heard in Mescal that he could do almost anything with his voice."

Nick was scowling. "Why's Ethel out here alone with that dandified outcast from a play-house?"

"Outcast?" Audrey echoed, puzzled. Then with a bit of warmth, "Swing Britton left the stage to hunt for the Silver Sisters mine, as you very well know, Nick. And why shouldn't Ethel enjoy his company?"

"Because Ethel doesn't savvy his breed," Nick replied flatly. "Britton's a smooth-talking, good-looking cuss, but we don't know a darn thing about him beyond that."

"He's Dad's partner," Audrey reminded him.

But she hardly knew what she was saying. She was fighting tears from her eyes, struggling against the sobs that rose in her throat. As soon as Nick saw Ethel with Swing he'd seemed to forget all about Audrey. Gone was the tenderness and fire from his eyes, the sweet huskiness from his voice.

Audrey bit her lips till they stung and clenched her hands in the folds of the buckskin skirt, fighting her deep disappointment. She'd dared to think Nick Sanders really loved her because she'd wanted his love with every breath she drew. He must have seen the hunger in her eyes, heard the plea in her voice, and so had taken her for a walk down the lane. Had taken her kiss and already forgotten it.

In that moment she fiercely hated him and Ethel Parsons. Then she saw that Nick was going to break up the twosome down in the grassy hollow.

"For goodness' sake," Audrey exclaimed with a laugh so brittle that it broke. "Ethel is over twenty-one, isn't she?"

Audrey could see, even if Nick couldn't, that Ethel was deliberately staging this little act. She was flirting with the handsome stranger just to rouse Nick's jealousy. It had been plain to Audrey from the moment she came to High Mesa that Ethel wished to be much closer to Nick than a neighbor and lifelong friend.

Nick hesitated. Then he shrugged and turned back to Audrey. When they were again in the darkening lane between the cottonwoods he stopped abruptly. He faced Audrey, and in spite of her hurt and anger she couldn't keep her heart from beating high with hope. She looked up, and seeing the first pale star twinkling in the violet-blue of the twilight sky she made a fervent wish that Nick would say it didn't really matter to him what Ethel did. That he wanted to talk about Audrey —and their future.

"WHAT I really aimed to speak about anyhow—" Nick began awkwardly, and stopped.

"Yes," breathed Audrey, her gaze steadfast on the star.

"Reckon there's no use beating about the bush," Nick declared. "It's Swing Britton. I don't trust that jasper."

"Oh!" gasped Audrey. The star disappeared in a mist of tears. "How *could* you?"

"I reckon that glib-talking coyote has you fooled too," Nick stated bitterly. "What I mean is, your father is plunging into this mine hunt blind. He's bought the best equipment. He's packing a roll that would choke a steer and he's aiming to set out tomorrow morning with an hombre that he ran into three weeks ago in Mescal and never heard of before."

Audrey took a long, quivering breath. She managed to speak with restraint.

"For your information, Nick Sanders, my father is an excellent judge of character. He didn't make a fortune dealing with people who would swindle him. Now that he's retired, if he wants to amuse himself seeking lost gold mines, you can rest assured he'll get his money's worth out of any venture he goes into." She forced her quivering lips to tilt scornfully at the corners. "After all, Dad's no fool."

Even if his daughter is, she added silently. She turned sharply away from Nick's searching gaze.

"I'm not worryin' so much about your dad's wasting his time and *dinero,*" Nick said quietly. "I'm wonderin' if he knows how good his chances are of not coming out of Haunted Mountains at all."

Audrey whirled about. Her eyes flashed and her voice trembled. "Don't be ridiculous! Don't let your absurd jealousy of Swing Britton make a fool out of *you,* Nick Sanders."

"Jealousy?" He looked startled and his mouth straightened as he stared at her flushed face. "You mean *you* and that hombre—" He broke off and the incredulity faded from his eyes. "I savvy," he said curtly. "I should have seen how it was."

Audrey spun away. She ran down the lane with the tears streaking over her hot cheeks, holding her hand pressed to her breast as though to ease the sharp, tearing pain there.

Later, lying in her dark room, Audrey heard voices outside her open window. When she recognized the two speakers as Nick and her father she sat up and listened.

"Thanks, Sanders," her father said firmly, "but I don't figure I'm taking any chances."

There was a moment's silence, broken only by the faint crackle of paper and then the rasp of a match against a bootsole. Tobacco smoke drifted in through the window before Nick spoke again.

"I can recall three other parties that felt that way, Mr. Brent. They stopped at High Mesa on the way into the mountains, too. One was a man with as good an outfit as you have, one an old desert rat with only a pack burro and lots of savvy, the third a pair of young professors on vacation. They all went into the Haunted Mountains certain they were on the right trail to the Silver Sisters mine." He paused, then concluded quietly, "None

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of them ever came out to tell about it."

Audrey couldn't repress a shudder, but her father seemed unimpressed.

"Things are different with us, Sanders. Britton and I have a sure thing. He has the only map of the mine that ever turned up. He got it from an old-timer who joined up with his vaudeville act. The prospector who originally discovered the Silver Sisters mine was this fellow's brother."

"Then why," Nick asked dryly, "didn't the old jasper claim the mine for himself?"

"Superstitious about it, apparently," Mr. Brent explained. "Believed along with the natives that the Indians had put a curse on it. Seems like young Britton helped the old fellow out of a tight spot and so he gave the map to him."

"And then," Nick's voice was still dry, "Britton came to you in Mescal with the story and you financed the whole business."

"With my eyes wide open," affirmed Mr. Brent. "And now, Mr. Sanders, much as I've enjoyed staying at your ranch, and grateful as I am that you folks will look after my daughter while I'm on this little excursion, my plans still go." His voice was pleasantly casual. "Here comes Miss Parsons. And it's time for me to turn in."

Audrey sat straighter, her slender back rigid as she listened to Ethel greet her father. But before his footsteps had died away Ethel said in a low urgent voice, "Nick, I had a hunch you were worried about something."

"First time I ever saw you lose your head over a jasper like that, Ethel," Nick offered somberly.

"You mean Swing?" Ethel laughed softly, and in her laughter Audrey recognized feminine triumph. "Nick, darling, you know I was only teasing you."

Audrey pressed her hands tight over her ears. But she couldn't shut out the soft murmur of their voices, moving away together in the darkness.

NEXT MORNING Audrey watched her father and Swing set off with the two ranch boys whom they'd hired to help them on the trip. Then she sat down in the sunny kitchen and accepted a second cup of coffee from Nick's pretty, plump mother.

"Thank goodness the menfolk are all out of the way for a bit," Betty Sanders sighed. She answered the question in Audrey's eyes with a nod. "Nick's taken some block salt out to the pasture."

Audrey dropped her lashes over telltale blue eyes. She felt a warm rush of color suffuse her face and neck. Just the mention of Nick's name could do that to her.

"Nick's an ornery critter even if he is my son," Betty mused. "He's stubborn as all get out when he gets his heart set on something. But everything's got to be just so before he'll open his mouth." She gazed out the window. "His pa was the same way. I thought he never would pop the question. Had to see the whole future laid out like a blueprint first."

Audrey's color deepened. She picked up her teaspoon and sugared her already sweetened coffee.

Betty went on serenely, "About girls for instance. Nick can act dumber than a bronc just out of the hills. But when he decides things are right for him to marry, he won't let any grass grow under his feet."

There was a flash of color outside the window. It was Ethel coming from the corral, a gypsy-red bandana tied about her smooth black hair.

Betty glanced out with an indulgent smile. "I don't know how I'd make out without Ethel coming over to help me," she remarked.

Ethel came into the house like a favorite daughter, greeting Betty with a breezy

kiss. Audrey's polite smile felt as though it were carved on her face. It was plain as daylight to her that Mrs. Sanders had guessed her secret and was kindly trying to tell her that when Nick got around to it he'd marry Ethel.

Hours later Audrey sat curled on an old bench in the shade of a drooping willow and watched Nick ride in from the pasture, sitting tall and easy in the saddle. Coming nearer and nearer. And in the house, Ethel waited—knowing full well how desirable she appeared in a saucy red-checked apron, surrounded by the rich fragrance of baking chocolate cake.

Audrey could cook, too. But she meant that to be a pleasant surprise for her future husband. Suddenly the thought of any man but Nick coming home to her was unbearable. She jumped to her feet and ran down to the corral, obsessed with the need to see him, to hear him speak to her alone out in the deserted, sunshine-flooded corral.

The gate was on the far side of the barred fence, so she decided to climb over. Nick had already led his horse inside and seemed to be in a powerful hurry to get to the house. Still watching him, Audrey placed her toes between the cedar poles and sprang nimbly up, thankful that she wore sturdy jeans.

And then she gave a sudden cry of surprise and pain and flailed the air with her arms as her boot toe firmly caught in the top rail. She jerked her foot desperately and the rail gave way. She pitched headlong from the top of the fence, closing her eyes and screaming again as she fell.

But she never hit the rough, rutted ground. She was caught in strong arms, and her eyes opened wide to meet Nick's concerned gaze.

"Nick," she gasped, and her arms went around his neck, clinging as though she still feared she would fall.

His arms tightened reassuringly. But Audrey still clung to him. His face was almost touching hers, framed by his battered old Stetson against the burning blue sky. Brown and clear-eyed and dear to her beyond the whole world.

His lips, warm and sweet and strong, came down on hers. He was gathering her tighter into his arms. For a blessed, brief instant his face was pressed to hers. Then he set her on her feet, held her while she steadied herself.

"These fences are sort of tricky," he said quietly. "Reckon you'd better look twice before you jump."

THE NEXT morning Audrey refused Betty's invitation to ride over to a neighboring ranch with her and Ethel. As soon as the two women were out of sight, she hurried down to the barn and saddled her favorite pony. She'd be sure to catch up with her father and Swing quite soon, heavily loaded as they were . . .

She couldn't stay at the ranch and face Nick Sanders again. No telling what she might do or say. And though he might kiss her again for a moment as though he meant it, he would immediately put her away from him. His eyes would become guarded and opaque and he'd suddenly be out of her reach.

The wind was warm on her face and the sun scorched her back, but she made good time, heading straight into the foothills and the canyon that Swing had pointed out. The mountains loomed closer, darker, and she looked up at them curiously, trying to recall what she'd heard about this lost mine her father was hunting.

It was named the Silver Sisters mine because from the mouth of the little side canyon in which the lost claim was located, two of the mountain peaks towering overhead were said to assume the shape of shawled women. And there was something about an old Indian curse . . .

Just then, rounding a sharp bend, Audrey unexpectedly met up with two

riders coming down from the mountains. She recognized Ed and Bert, the two boys who had accompanied her father.

"Why on earth are you going back?" she asked, fear sharpening her voice. "Has something happened?"

"Not yet, ma'am," Bert replied, glancing swiftly over his shoulder. "But I *told* Ed we hadn't ought to go into the Haunted Mountains, no matter how much your old man paid."

"We're gittin' out, ma'am, while we can," Ed added. "When a voice speaks to me plumb out of the flat wall of a cliff and tells me to git, I git. I don't fool around with no kind of spirits."

Audrey stared at them in amazement. It was ridiculous, here in this crystal-clear dry air, with warm sunshine flooding over them, to speak of spirits. But the two boys stuck to their story. As they herded the mules along the trail that morning, a short distance behind her father and Swing, a voice had suddenly thundered from the face of a cliff, warning them to turn back while there was yet time.

Ed and Bert went on their way, and Audrey pushed on up the trail, following their reluctant directions. The mesquite and saguaro now rapidly gave way to scrub oak and manzanita, and the air became sharp and cool. Stopping long enough to rest her horse and eat her sandwiches beside a rushing stream, Audrey reflected that those boys weren't any too bright anyhow. They'd no doubt been frightened by an echo, or the wind.

She traveled most of the night, stopping only to rest her horse, and next afternoon she came into sight of the camp. She could see her father, sitting against an upright slab of stone, making notes in the little book he carried. Her relief was so sharp that it left her breathless; she hadn't known until then how her apprehension had grown through the long ride.

Her father called a greeting.

"Can't get up," he explained as she came up to him. "Had a little accident and hurt my leg. Lucky to get out of it that lightly." He indicated a heap of stones and earth and tangled brush. "Rockslide fell across the trail. Missed Britton, behind me, by a hair."

As Audrey explained her presence she glanced up at the cliffs rearing steeply overhead. Then, when she'd satisfied herself that her father's bruised leg was properly dressed she walked over to stare at the pile of fresh debris, trying to reason herself out of the shock and increasing, unreasonable terror she felt. Suddenly, she bent to examine a pale golden gleam. How, she wondered, had a length of new rope become almost completely buried in the rockslide?

"Howdy, Audrey!" Swing's surprised voice reached her from the far side of the camp.

He appeared relieved at her unexpected arrival. "Mebbe you can argue your dad into turning back," he declared. "I'll do some scouting around myself and then report."

"We'll see in the morning," Mr. Brent decided.

Audrey hoped that he'd be sensible and leave. Even though it was a shame to give up this near their goal, she couldn't shake off the fear that had a strangle hold on her.

THAT EVENING she couldn't relax, bone-weary though she was. The campfire made a bright circle of warmth and light. But back of that light there were strange rustlings in the dark. Secret, mysterious voices of the night. A chill wind howled down a box canyon like a fretful spirit.

But no spirit had planted a rope in that pile of rock debris. Audrey stared in the flames. What if there was some determined person or persons who deliberately kept alive the tale of the old Indian curse, and meanwhile drove away or murdered

anyone who came dangerously near the Silver Sisters mine?

She shivered. She'd tell Swing about that rope the first chance she had to talk to him alone. She wouldn't tell her dad and risk rousing his stubbornness and defiance.

Audrey resolutely fought against the homesickness she already felt for High Mesa Ranch, the heart-hungry longing for Nick. She lay awake while the camp quieted. When her father was snoring peacefully she decided that it would be safe to waken Swing. But before she could call him she saw him slip out of his bed roll, and moving as silently as a cat, slip away from camp.

Just as silently, Audrey followed. She could understand his restlessness. He'd been nervous all evening. His dark eyes had glittered with excitement, with the expectancy of finding the lost mine.

Swing moved swiftly and Audrey barely managed to keep on his trail. Breathless, she stumbled into the open mouth of a little side canyon and paused to listen. She glanced up just as the moon pushed through a cloud bank, and a thrill of excitement, of recognition, shot through her. For clear against the sky rose two oddly-formed peaks. Like giant, shawled women they bent toward the little canyon between them, the moonlight glistening whitely on their rounded, smooth tops.

The Silver Sisters!

In the excitement of her discovery, Audrey called to Swing. When he didn't reply, she looked around hopefully. And just as her glance crossed the bald face of the nearest cliff, a deep, thunderous voice boomed out:

"Go! Leave Haunted Mountains while you live!"

Audrey gave a gasping cry and froze.

Lingo Roundup Answers

Across

1. em
4. maverick
9. tavern
10. oils
13. ire
14. burners
17. carrot
20. ergo
21. T
22. dory
23. van
25. as
26. R
27. Ala. (Alabama)
28. dam
29. Al
30. hoe
32. so
33. co. (company)
34. ebb
36. imps
37. hr. (hour)
38. reb
40. aids
42. es
43. serenade
45. an
46. siesta
47. ear
49. end
50. G. E. (Great Expectations)
51. ring

Down

1. Eve
2. mer
3. pi
4. marry
5. aver
6. RNB
7. corral
8. kings
9. tiara
11. Leo
12. sr. (senior)
15. ue
16. stress
17. color
18. ova
19. tame
22. dash
24. N (north)
28. doers
29. abide
30. H. M.
31. open
33. creed
35. baa
36. is
39. bet
41. dear
43. sin
44. nag
45. A
46. se
48. R. I. (Rhode Island)
52. n

The voice came straight out of the bare face of that cliff!

"Swing!" she cried frantically. She turned and plunged through the brush, scratching her hands and face, calling for Swing.

"Audrey, what happened?" He answered close at hand.

She was babbling with terror and shock.

"The voice—the voice that Ed and Bert heard! D-didn't you hear it?"

Swing laughed, but his laughter was cut short.

"Reach for the sky, you voice-slingin', play-actin' coyote," came a sharp command. "And then let's hear you laugh."

"Nick." Audrey was beyond anything but a faint whisper for the moment. "This must be a crazy dream," she said weakly.

But it wasn't a dream. It was a very tall and solid Nick who stepped into the clearing. Swing's hand darting to his hip was fast, but Nick was faster. The shot from his Colt echoed and re-echoed in the narrow canyon. Swing stood dumbly staring down at his own gun lying yards away.

"Mighty nice little ventriloquist act," Nick remarked, coming forward. "They were right when they said you could do anything with your voice, Britton. I figured that one out after I ran into Ed and Bert."

"And with a rope," Audrey said clearly, though her knees were buckling beneath her. "That's why the new rope was buried in the rock slide. *You,* behind Dad, swung a loop over a boulder above and loosened it. You t-tried to kill him."

BACK AT the camp where her father was hobbling around and yelling what the hell was going on, Nick explained his opportune arrival.

"I wasn't four hours behind you on the trail," he told Audrey. "Then when I met Ed and Bert I came all the faster." He flicked a sharp glance at Swing, sullen and silent, his hands bound behind him. "I laid low to see what this coyote meant to pull. So I was right on your heels when you followed him out of camp, Audrey."

They reached High Mesa Ranch two evenings later, and Nick went on into Mescal with his prisoner.

Betty Sanders fussed over Audrey. "Nick sure made things hum when he found you'd struck out for the mountains alone," she remarked. "He lit on me and on Ethel for not mindin' you. Ethel got mad and left—for good, she claims."

"But—but—she and Nick—" Audrey faltered.

"Honey," Mrs. Sanders said gently, "if Nick had wanted to marry Ethel he'd a done it long ago. Like I said, he's plumb stubborn about such things. Everything's got to be just so with him before he'll say his say."

That evening, Nick rode in, looking so handsome that Audrey's heart turned clear over. After supper, in an extremely polite manner, he invited her to walk down the lane.

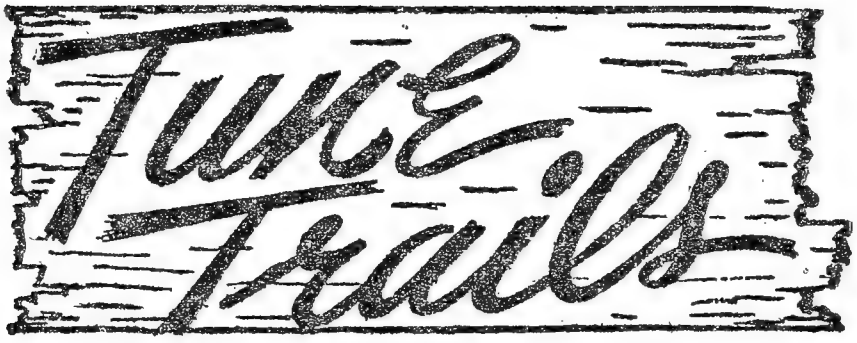
She went, stepping along in her fringed buckskin skirt, her brown curls blowing and her blue eyes wide.

"About Britton turning out to be such a sidewinder," Nick began gravely, "did —did you really care?"

"Me?" Audrey cried. "Long as he got caught before he did any real damage, of course I don't care. I'm glad."

Nick's relieved smile broke like the sun coming out of clouds. "Then," he said, "I reckon it's all right for me to tell you I've loved you from the day you set foot on the ranch—"

Audrey went into his arms with a sob. Then he kissed her and she was lost to the world again, with the rustling cottonwoods like tiny angels' wings beating through her.



by Sandy Hill

HELLO, FOLKS, your record rater is back again for another roundup of the latest doin's on wax—and what did you think of the last crop? Takin' a sort of bird's eye view, I see that my predictions on two really paid off. If you haven't been driven crazy listening to Art Mooney's *Four Leaf Clover,* we have out here. I hear tell that the MGM waxing has passed the million mark. Not bad for a song more than twenty-five years old. Tex Williams' *Never Trust a Woman* seems to have caught on, too. Guess there are a lot of guys who go for that talk—and a lot of women curious to hear just what Tex has to say.

Well, to get on with the business of this month's latest, I thought you might like to have me corral what I know of America's number one cowboy hero, whose life story will soon be immortalized on the screen. Genial Gene Autry of movie, record and radio fame. People are forever writing in to hear about this Oklahoman who made good, but there is so much of interest about him it's hard to tell where to start.

F'rinstance, did you know that Gene might still be a teletype operator in Chelsea, Oklahoma, if Will Rogers hadn't happened by and heard him sing? It happened this way. Gene was punching a key for a living back in 'Twenty-nine, and one night while he was strumming his guitar and humming, a man came in to send a telegram. Gene didn't pay any particular attention to him—just kept on playing and singing. When he stopped, the stranger came over and in that famous drawling voice said, "Well, young feller, all I can say is that you're wasting your time out here. You ought to be in radio." With that he put down his telegram, smiled and walked out. That was the boost that Gene needed; he quit his job and set out to be a singer. It was years later that Will found out that his chance remark was the inspiration for Gene Autry's fabulous career.

America's leading cowboy box-office attraction was born in Texas and grew up in Oklahoma. His dad was a cattle buyer, and Gene learned a lot about the cattle business by helping out after school. He was still a youngster when he started working for the railroad and learned his dots and dashes from the railroad telegrapher. But after Will Rogers led him to quit his job in Chelsea, he took his guitar and headed for New York. Three weeks later he was back in Oklahoma—broke.

He kept trying, though, and soon landed

a job in a Tulsa station, KVVO. You folks out there may remember Gene when he was Oklahoma's Singing Cowboy. He attracted a big following and was soon signed by a record company. His first record was a song he wrote with another telegraph operator, called *Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine,* and it sold more than a million copies. After that he landed a radio spot in Chicago, and then a Hollywood contract. He had a small spot in a Ken Maynard horse opera, but his fan mail was so huge that Hollywood bowed to public demand and featured Gene in his own movie. He starred in many serials and his first full length motion picture was *Tumbling Tumbleweeds.*

In addition to being America's number one cowboy Gene has held a lot of firsts since his career reached its peak in movieland. Did you know he was the first cowboy to make recordings . . . the first singing cowboy on radio . . . the first to make singing westerns . . . and the first movie star to have a town named after him? Yes sir, that's true, for there's a town in Oklahoma called Gene Autry.

During the war Gene was a flight officer, and the first thing he did after serving Uncle Sam for three years was to join the USO and tour the South Pacific. Now he's back in uniform again —his cowboy outfit. If you can't see him riding at a rodeo or in his pictures, you can always hear his records, for he's consistently one of the best sellers.

I hope you've enjoyed this little Autry sketch, folks. And if you have any other favorites you'd like to see in this celebrity corral, just pick up your pen 'n let me know.

Curly Williams

Here's another Columbia Records folk-artist; they sure have a good crop of them. Curly is one of the best modern hillbillies in the business, and, like many other folk-artists, is going in for a sort of orchestra in dance tempo with a sweet violin, instead of the standby harmonica and guitar. Frankly, I like both, just so's the artist is good at it—and Curly is plenty good. The first side features Curly singing *Just A-Pickin' and A-Singin',* and it has a lively string band accompaniment of the Georgia Peachpickers. This first side is a novelty number, but it's the other side I really go for. It's *The Georgia Polka,* and I bet my new boots you'll be hoppin to this one, it's that good and lively. That's Joe Pope who does such a fine job on the vocals.

Karl and Harty

The rather cynical trend to warn men from mixing numerous ingredients with women is heard in Capitol's Americana series featuring the talented twosome of Karl and Harty. You'll weep in your beer when you hear this sad song, but take heed . . . *Don't Mix Whiskey with Women.* This type of musical story is always a good bet, and it takes on added color with the musical mood contributed by the guitar and mandolin—oh, so sad. *You Cooked Your Goose with Me* is a typical folk humor tune, and those who go for hillbilly songs will like this.

Salty Holmes with his Brown Country Boys

Decca Records doesn't feature too many folk artists, but with Salty Holmes, they've got someone to sing about. Salty is a new Country Series artist—a slick and skilful harmonica player who has been a frequent guest on the Red Foley "Grand Old Opry" program on Saturday nights. This, his first for Decca, features an original composition which he also popularized. It's *Mama Blues,* very commercial, and with some very unusual har-

(Continued on page 98)

For Hours Like This . . .

When a Western moon is shining
On mountain, hill and plain,
And the stock is all corraled
It's time to sing again.

Then the campfires flicker brightly,
And cowboys gather round
To croon of lonesome prairies
Where the purple sage is found.

And Western maids who listen
Wander out to stand close by,
While the silver moon above them
Slowly winks a solemn eye.

For he knows that moonlight magic
Still abounds in this wide land,
And lovers, two by two, will soon
Go walking hand in hand.

For night and music, lad and lass
Were made for hours like this,
And when the moon dips low, romance
Is branded with a kiss!

—Catherine E. Berry

• LITTLE MISS

by Kenneth L. Sinclair

PINE NEEDLES formed a cushiony carpet, inches deep, on the Running Deer trail. They silenced the hoofs of Fran Bonner's pinto as, with the cool mountain breeze against her cheeks, she reined the mount around the sharp bend.

Then she caught her breath in quick astonishment. Ahead was a bunch of wild turkeys, clustered about a spring! She'd taken them plumb by surprise—but now the big birds saw her and took instant flight, their wings drumming and their feathers flashing color.

Fran quieted the pinto's rearing and snorting. She pushed her sombrero back from her small, lovely, but troubled face. "Gosh!" she said aloud. "Calico, old hoss, we've seen something today! I never thought I'd get that close to wild turkeys!"

"You won't again, likely," observed a masculine voice. "Not if you always do that good a job of scatterin' 'em."

Fran swung to stare at the lank, tanned young hombre who rose out of some brush that had been piled against a windfall. She felt color come to her cheeks. From the tone of the man's voice, it seemed that she'd done something wrong. And Fran's feelings were bruised enough already, without being told off by this underfed-looking stranger.

"What was I supposed to do, cackle or something to let them know I was coming?" she demanded, lifting her chin. "And what were you doing, hiding in that brush? This isn't hunting season!"

The man was building himself a smoke. He licked the paper carefully, and watched her with level gray eyes that seemed amused.

"Maybe I was scared one of them big gobblers would mistake me for a grasshopper, an' eat me."

"Oh!" Fran suddenly realized that this must be the man she had come up here to find. And if he was, she sure had gotten things off to a bad start. "You—you're camping at Wild Horse Lake, aren't you? I heard about you down in Sycamore. I'm Fran Bonner, and I want to hire you to—"

Her words were coming with a rush now, crowded by the urgency and the worry behind them. But he held up a hand and interrupted her.

"Hold on there! Wait a minute. My ears ain't geared to talk that comes at 'em that fast. There's time an' to spare, up here in the forest. Kind of draw off from things a ways, an' take it easy. Light down. We'll sit on the grass here, till you catch your breath."

Fran obeyed, almost without realizing that she was doing so. The stranger's easy-going calmness seemed to be contagious.

"YOU'RE RAY WALTON?" she asked. "The storekeeper in Sycamore, where you bought supplies, said that you looked like a top hand."

"Well, I've throwed a catch rope, a time or two. But I ain't lookin' for work right now."

"Oh please! I've got to make a beef gather. There isn't much stock—the two of us should be able to do it in four days. But I can't do it alone!"

He glanced at her in mild surprise. And suddenly she was aware of the fact

FIRECRACKER

Beautiful Fran thought she had sparked the paint-slinger's interest—till he gave her the brushoff for a blonde!

"Do I have to kiss this gal through the bars?" Ray wanted to know.

that, in worn, denim levis and man-style shirt, she didn't look altogether helpless.

But he said, "You must want to bring in them critters powerful bad. Can't you get any help down around Sycamore?"

"They're all afraid!" she burst out—then instantly regretted what she had said. "Dad's range is rough country," she amended. "B-but I've just got to turn those critters into cash. Dad's in jail—I can't just leave him in that terrible place, and it takes money to get him out."

Amusement flickered again in those disturbing gray eyes. "What'd he do, kick his heels too high on Saturday night?"

She shook her dark head. "It was just a harmless prank! But someone turned it into a robbery, and they've got Dad charged with it."

Ray Walton leaned back, resting his elbows on the grass, and looked up at the deep blue of the Arizona sky. "Sounds like you Bonners are a rip-snortin' outfit—Say, did anybody ever tell you that the way your nose kind of tilts up at the end is a sign of a mischievous disposition?"

Fran wondered why that odd comment should bring a sudden warm glow to her heart. But she was spared from thinking of a suitable retort by the sharp *clip-clop* of hoofbeats which announced the arrival of another party.

The rider was Cline Sawdell. Stocky, with quick impatience in all his movements, he brought his Arabian horse around the bend of the trail and dismounted.

He slapped his quirt against the leg of his riding breeches as he strode forward. "Saw you line out this way, Fran," he said. "Figured this was what you had in mind, so I thought I'd better follow along. She been trying to hire you, drifter?"

Ray Walton didn't seem nettled any. He yawned. "Yup. She wasn't gettin' anywhere with it, though. We drifters are a mighty lazy lot."

Cline looked satisfied. "Just as well. She's all worked up over nothing. You know how these fillies are—the closer you get 'em to the altar, the more skittish they get."

"I wouldn't know about that," Ray said. "Always sort of stood back from 'em a ways, an' watched the fool things that others did when they went courtin'."

Cline's face hardened. Ray was on his feet now—and for a moment the two faced each other. Fran scrambled to her feet too, realizing that, beneath the surface, there was a subtle clash between these men.

Cline was glaring. He was handsome, Fran had always thought, in a square-jawed pugnacious sort of way. He had an office in Sycamore town where he conducted an ore-buying business and loaned money to stockmen on the side. Until a few weeks ago, he never had given Fran a second glance.

Then he started calling around, at the ramshackle Lazy B spread, almost every night. Within a week he had proposed—and he kept right on proposing.

Now he warned Ray Walton, "Don't get humorous with me, drifter. And stay away from the Sycamore country!"

"Generally," Ray said, "I go where I damn well please."

"Meaning you're going to help this fool girl with her beef gather?"

"Maybe."

Cline shook his head. "Cowboy, if you ever get near that Lazy B, they'll carry you—"

Ray's hand dropped, with magical speed, to the gun that Fran hadn't even noticed he had. The weapon seemed to leap from the holster, and center upon Cline Sawdell.

CLINE'S MOUTH worked a couple of times, before sound came forth. "Gunman, eh?" he said in a fury-strangled voice.

"Nope. Just an hombre who likes to have things calm, placid, an' serene. I've learned that the best way to handle a gent with mean ideas is to do what he's thinkin' of doing—one jump ahead of him! Now climb on that fancy horse, an git!"

Cline retreated to the Arabian. But he wasn't through yet. He said, "No man living can pull a gun on me twice. You'll be well advised to stay plumb away from these parts, drifter. I carry a lot of weight around here."

"Carry some around your middle, too," Ray said dryly. "But you got me so terrified, this minute, that I'm shakin' like an aspen leaf. Better mosey down that trail, before my finger triggers this shootin' iron accidental."

Cline mounted up, his face dark with wrath, and reined the Arabian roughly to the trail. In a moment the bend hid him from sight.

"Gosh!" Fran breathed.

Ray grinned, like the row had ruffled his feathers not a bit. "Reckon you've hired yourself a hand, Miss Fran. I don't aim to get inquisitive, but I can't help wonderin' what kind of a ranch you got, where there ain't a solitary hired hand to do the work."

"Well . . ." Fran paused, wishing she could think of some neat way of bending the truth around a little. "It's not much of a spread, any more. All the cowboys quit. They couldn't put up with finding their stirrup-straps unbuckled, salt in the sugarbowl, and water in the bunkhouse lamp. That sort of thing wore them down, I guess."

He gave her a sudden, understanding grin. "Your dad?"

She nodded. "Uh-huh. Dad's a grand old guy—but I think he just never grew up."

"He sounds like quite an old gobbler, Fran. Tell you what I'll do—I'll go get the horse I got staked out up the slope a ways, and ride over to the lake after my stuff. You stay here and rest. You must be tired after the ride up here, and I don't reckon Sawdell will be comin' back."

Ray loosened the cinch of Fran's saddle, and led the pinto to the spring for a drink. Then he stepped into the pile of brush, and emerged a moment later with a big piece of paper which he rolled carefully and tucked under his arm. He gave Fran a reassuring grin and set off at an easy, long-legged stride through the pines.

Fran rested. But Ray Walton's lean, tanned face, with that ready grin that fitted it so naturally, started haunting her.

Partly to be doing something, partly because her curiosity was bubbling up, she rose and went over to the pile of brush. It was arranged in horseshoe shape, and as she stepped inside she saw

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WILDROOT CREAM-OIL HAIR TONIC

a narrow opening through which the occupant could watch the spring.

There was a sort of tripod affair, made of pine sticks, in the blind. It supported a two-foot-square board. The ground under it was littered with pencil stubs.

The hombre had been hunting turkeys, all right—but not with a gun. With a pencil.

Fran whistled softly. "Have I hired a cowboy—" she mused, "or an artist?"

After Ray had come back, leading a laden pack-horse, and they had started toward Sycamore town, she asked him point-blank.

"Little of both, I guess," he told her. "Between ridin' jobs, I like to sling a little paint. Always wanted to make a picture of wild turkeys, so I came up here to fix up some workin' sketches."

Fran glanced at him through long lashes, wondering at the sudden feeling of shyness which possessed her. "I'm sure sorry I scared the turkeys away," she told him.

"Never you mind that, Fran. Right now I'm wonderin' why that Sawdell cuss is so all-fired interested in keepin' you from making your beef gather."

"He wants to marry me."

Ray tilted back his head and grinned. "Now that clears it all up fine! If that's his style of courtin', why don't he just throw rocks at you?"

"You don't understand! I've turned him down. And now that Dad's in jail, Cline thinks he can crowd me into changing my mind, by fixing things so I can't get Dad out without his help."

Ray looked thoughtful. "Let's go see your dad, in that Sycamore calaboose," he said after a while. "I got a little money."

BUT WHEN Sam Endicott, sheriff of Sycamore county, told Ray that Fran's father was being held for three hundred dollars bail, the cowpuncher-artist shook his head.

"More'n I got," he admitted. "Could we see the prisoner?"

"Sure," Endicott said, taking a big ring of keys down from a nail and ambling along the cell corridor. "But keep away from 'im, else you'll likely find a rotten egg in your watch-pocket, or somethin' such. Hey, Bonner, you got company!"

Trem Bonner reached a hand through the bars to shake with Ray, when Fran introduced them. Jail hadn't taken any of the pepper out of old Trem. His face was as rosy as ever, his very blue eyes alert as they inspected Ray Walton.

"Fran roped you in, huh? Figured she would. All she's got to do, that daughter of mine, is crook her finger an' all the young bucks in the Sycamore country come a-runnin'."

"Dad!" Fran snapped.

"It's kind of odd," Ray said, "that all those young bucks you mentioned didn't pitch right in and help her gather that beef."

"With all of 'em owin' money to Cline Sawdell, one way or another?" old Trem demanded. "Many a young ranny that thinks he's in love, I've noticed, calms down awful sudden when it comes to a choice between the gal an' eatin' regular."

"Old-timer," Ray said, "you're a keen observer. Now, just what did you do to get yourself locked up in this place?"

"Nothin' at all! Well . . . next to nothin'. All I done was sneak into ol' man Kirby's house an' stuff some tarpaper up the chimbly of his stove. When a man builds a fire, the heat makes the tarpaper sort of swell, an' the smoke backs up an' pours out of the stove right elegant. But the thing was, somebody robbed Kirby of his life savin's that same night—the ol' fool had 'em stuck in a cheese-box. Since I was seen leavin' the place, they

got me tallied for a thief! When all I aimed to do was stir things up a mite. . ."

Ray reached through the bars to put his hand on Trem's shoulder. "Don't you worry, old-timer. We'll get you out of here before the environment plumb poisons your better nature."

Sheriff Endicott snorted loudly. "Don't lose any sleep over that, stranger! Trem's been in here so many times, we've talked about buildin' a special cell for 'im. If the charge ain't distrubin' the peace, it's a complaint swore out by the victim of one of his jokes."

Ray gave Fran a sharply quizzical look that made her want to sink through the floor. Without coming right out and saying so, she had given him the idea that her father was a stranger to jails, and that that was the reason she wanted to get him out as soon as possible. Now she'd been caught in her fib.

But a grin creased Ray's lean features. "Reckon we'd better go see the gent who got robbed, Fran," he said, mildly.

JUST AS they passed the bank, on their way to old Lost-Lode Kirby's cabin, Cline Sawdell's flashy station wagon tore down the street and came to a halt in front of Cline's office.

The girl who got out matched the station wagon for style. She was a little taller than Fran, slim and trim in her outfit of white silk blouse, breeches and polished riding boots. Her blond hair fell to her shoulders in soft waves.

Ray whistled softly. "Well! Now who might that be?" he inquired, watching the girl go into Cline's office.

Fran was a while answering. She was acutely aware of her own faded working outfit. And, for some fool reason that she couldn't quite savvy right this minute, she was infuriated by Ray's alert male interest in the lithe and graceful bit of scenery he'd just observed.

"That's—that's Veronica," she told him, biting back her feeling of chagrin. "Cline's sister."

"Hmmm! Right pretty gal. Slick as a fresh-curried colt. Calculates to get herself looked at, too."

Fran couldn't summon an answer for that. But she made a quick resolve: The minute she got home she was going to get out of these working duds and into that new dress. If this long-geared galoot liked 'em slick and flashy, she aimed to show him that she could keep up with Veronica any old day!

She was still deep in contemplation when they reached Kirby's place. The whiskery old prospector, lamed by injuries he'd received in a mine cave-in years ago, seemed glad to have someone to talk to.

"Yes-siree," he said sadly. "That skunk took every cent of my savin's—nigh onto eight hundred dollars—from this ol' cheese-box I kep' under my bunk. Didn't touch anything else, though. Had all my maps showin' the lost mines in there, too, but he let 'em be."

"Lost mines?" Ray asked.

"Yep! I got more lost-mine savvy than any other man in the country, I reckon. Spent a good many years huntin' 'em. Got maps for mines all the way from the Lost Dutchman, down by Weaver's Needle, to the Blue Bucket, up in Oregon. Here—have yerself a look."

Fran could tell, by Ray's expression, that he'd heard all about lost mines. Generally speaking, the legends were pretty much alike—and for every mine, there were a hundred "authentic" maps floating around.

But Kirby had unshakable faith in the legends. "These are worth more'n the money, to me," he went on, leafing through his maps. "Got an even dozen of 'em— Hey! There's one, here, that looks like new paper. That ain't right . . ."

With trembling hands, the oldster unfolded the paper. It was blank. Hurriedly Kirby counted the remaining maps.

"One of 'em's gone!" he announced despairingly. "It's—it's the one for the Sleepin' Burro Mine that the skunk swiped! He slipped this blank paper in its place, figurin' maybe that I'd just count the papers an' decide they was all here."

"You think Trem Bonner did it?" Ray asked.

"Shucks, no! Me'n that ol' foozler, we been feudin' back an' forth for years, puttin' gunpowder in each other's 'baccy an' such. But he wouldn't steal my map. Funny thing, though—that mine is supposed to be right around here some'ers. The map don't tell where. All it shows is the Injun tunnels inside the mine, a regular maze of 'em, with the gold at the end of just one partic'lar tunnel. Likely they never was timbered, an' most of 'em have caved in, an' a man'd have to dig—"

In another moment, Kirby would have been wound up on his favorite subject, but Ray Walton interrupted gently, "It's getting pretty late in the day, old-timer. Fran and I will have to hit the leather to get to her ranch by dark. Thanks a heap—and I hope you get your map back."

AT THE Lazy B ranch-house, Fran stepped out of her room and braved the shrewd scrutiny of Maria, the cook.

A slow, knowing smile came to her face. "*Señorita,* you are pretty like the picture, *si*! You make the young *hombre* open wide the eyes, I'm theenk!"

"Don't be silly, Maria. I just want to show him that even in the back country, people can be civilized."

"Ees that what make the blue eyes shine like the star?" Maria inquired knowingly, as she finished setting the table.

But when Ray Walton came in from the bunkhouse, reasonably curried and slicked up, he didn't open his eyes wide. He just stopped in his tracks and said, "Good gosh!"

"What's the matter?" Fran smiled.

His gulp was audible. "In that dress, with your hair so—well, you look like—you look like— Well—good gosh!"

With that for a send-off, the meal went pretty well. Maria hovered around more than was necessary, eyeing Ray with approval and sending meaningful glances Fran's way.

After the pie and coffee, it took some coaxing to get Ray to go out to the bunkhouse and bring in some of his paintings. But when Fran saw them she caught her breath.

"Why, they're all—beautiful! People would leap at a chance to buy them."

He shook his head. "They ain't for sale, Fran. I paint 'em because I like to do it."

Fran looked at his lean, calm young face, and felt a deepening stir of interest in her heart. Quickly, she put her hand on his arm.

"Ray, I feel guilty about dragging you into this. Cline has kept everybody else from helping me make the gather—and after the way he threatened you . . . Please be careful!"

"Shucks, I'll make out. I'm an hombre that likes trouble not at all, anyhow. Like to stand off a ways from things, to get a better look at 'em. First thing in the morning we'll start that gather, Fran."

Before she could guess his intention, he bent his head and brushed her lips with his. The kiss, brief as it was, filled her with tingling shivers.

" 'Night," he said, and strode off.

With the brilliant light of an Arizona moon streaming through her window, and the image of Ray's easy, humorous grin filling her thoughts, Fran was a long while getting to sleep. She found herself treasuring, in memory, every moment of

his nearness . . . his kiss. . . But at last she slept.

WHEN SHE woke, it was with surprise to see that the sun was high. Dressing hurriedly in her working outfit—but spending a little extra time with her hair—she called to Maria in the kitchen.

The Mexican woman told her that Ray had eaten his breakfast long ago; that he'd saddled and gone, before sunrise.

She hurried through breakfast, then went out to catch and saddle Calico. Mounted, she rode swiftly up the canyon trail and through the broken country that comprised the Lazy B range.

Worry pulled at Fran's nerves. And with it, a feeling of annoyance, because Ray had ridden off without waiting for her to guide him.

Yet it was with a sense of tremendous relief that she saw him round a bend of the trail and come rapidly toward her.

"Ray!" she called. "Didn't you find any of the stock?"

He nodded, grinning slightly. "Yup. Seen a few. But we can't make a gather—all you've got left is breeding stock, and if you sold that you'd have nothing to build a herd on. I reckon your dad will have to stay in jail. He seems right at home there, anyway."

Fran stiffened. Did he have to remind her of the way she'd played on his sympathy by letting him think that her father was a stranger to jails?

"You don't understand!" she cried. "It's not just to get him out. I've got to hire a lawyer!"

"I got a better idea. Just sit back an'—"

"I certainly will not sit back! Darn it, mister, you're working for me. Either take orders or quit!"

Even as she said that, she wondered what imp of temper possessed her.

And his reaction was about what she expected. He thumbed back his Stetson, got a stubborn, I-won't-be-p u s h e d-around-by-a-woman look on his lean face, and said, "Little Miss Firecracker, by gosh! Just for that, I'll let you stew a while. Good-*bye*!"

Lifting his horse to a lope, he swept past her.

Feeling thoroughly angry with her temper, with Ray, and with everything in general, Fran returned to the ranch. Maria gave her a shrewd glance.

"*Señorita*, what is the matter? Is it that the young *hombre* 'ave give you the kiss—or that he 'ave not?"

Fran fled to her room. There, she put trembling hands to her cheeks and stared accusingly at her reflection in the mirror.

"Did you *have* to go an' fall in love with that spindly, paint-slingin' galoot?" she demanded.

The mood lasted a while. But along in

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the afternoon curiosity and worry over what might be happening in Sycamore got the best of her. She saddled and rode into town, stopping at the jail to ask old Trem if Ray had been in to see him.

"Nope," her father informed her. "But I been seein' plenty of what's goin' on! Jail's the best place I know, to keep up to date on what happens. Right through this window I seen your long-legged cowboy hobnobbin' with Cline Sawdell, there in the street. They was practically pattin' each other's backs! What did you put that cowboy up to, anyway?"

"N-nothing!" Fran blurted, through a sudden screen of tears.

She left the jail as soon as she could. But just as she slipped Calico's reins from the hitch-pole she saw Ray come out of Cline's office and cross the street to the café. He wasn't alone. Lithely matching his stride and keeping a dainty hand on his arm—was Veronica Sawdell.

She was nearly out of town when Ray came running along the sidewalk. "Fran! I got to tell you—"

"You don't have to tell me anything!" she said icily. "You can come after your gear and your paintings any time. And I'm glad you don't have to stand off a ways from Veronica, to see how pretty she is!"

Wanting to bite her tongue off for having betrayed her feelings, she dusted Calico with the ends of the reins and got out of there.

SHE WAS sitting on the Lazy B porch that evening, trying to get used to the fact that Ray had sold out for money and a pretty face, when the sound of approaching hoofs set her nerves to tingling.

But it wasn't Ray. It was Cline Sawdell, and he swung down from his horse and helped himself to a chair. He had a complacent look on his square-jawed face.

"Kind of throwed a crimp in your little scheme, didn't it, when your drifter cowboy went to work for me? He's kind of taken a shine to Sis, too." Cline leaned over and patted Fran's hand.

She snatched it away. But that didn't seem to ruffle him any—he was used to it by now.

"Best thing for you to do," he informed her, "is get down off your high horse and marry me. You'll have money, fine clothes, a car. We can put that father of yours in an institution—"

"Dad's not crazy!" she flared. "It's just that he lived in pioneer mining camps when he was young, and they had no amusement except playing jokes on each other. It got into his blood. Now you get out of here, Cline Sawdell!"

She stamped her foot. But Cline just grinned and moved toward her, reaching out his arms.

Suddenly, the screen door creaked and Maria stood there with a cleaver held meaningly in her hand.

"*Hombre,*" she said, "is bes' you get the hell out!"

Cline got. But his going didn't change anything, as Fran realized during the long, sleepless night. He had her in a corner. The only way she could keep her father from a probable prison sentence was to accept Cline's money—and proposal.

In the morning Fran dried her eyes and rode to Sycamore, resolved to go through with it.

But she found the town in a state of wild excitement. Lost-Lode Kirby came limping out of the café to tell her the news.

"Big robbery last night, Fran! Somebody burgled Cline Sawdell's office. He found it out when he opened up this mornin', an' he up an' accused that cowpoke you hired. They found Walton sleepin' in the haymow of the livery barn, an' they got 'im in the calaboose right now!"

Followed by Kirby, Fran hurried into the jail. In the cell next to Trem's, look-

ing calm and unconcerned, was Ray Walton. The sheriff and a group of townsmen were milling around in the corridor. Cline was there, too, looking angry and grim.

RAY GAVE Fran a ghost of a smile. "Now that everybody's here," he said, "I might as well confess—"

"Wait!" Fran cried impulsively. "Sheriff, he couldn't have done it! He was at the Lazy B last night!"

"Thanks, Fran," Ray said, giving her a look that made her heart race wildly. "But it's no go. I'm guilty as hell. You see, I found a lot of signs of activity, of comin's and goin's, out there on the Lazy B range yesterday. What happened was that Sawdell or somebody workin' for him stumbled onto the lost Sleepin' Burro Mine. But it was on Lazy B land—so Sawdell figured a good way to get the property was to marry into the Bonner family."

"The drifter's lyin'!" Cline barked. "He's got no proof!"

Ray's smile turned wintry. "I was comin' to that. Havin' found the mine, Sawdell discovered he was up against a stone wall. The thing was all caved in—he'd have to dig out a whole mountain to find where the gold was. So he stole Kirby's map, aimin' to get Trem Bonner blamed for it— Trem, who put you up to pullin' that whizzer on Kirby?"

"Hell!" piped old Trem, in sudden comprehension. "I was havin' me a drink in the s'loon, an' Cline drifted in an' we got talkin' about jokes I'd pulled off, an' he said—"

"That's about what I figured," Ray interrupted. "But the thing was to get hold of some proof. I had to play up to Sawdell, hang around his office till I found out where he kept his valuables. Then, by a little burglary, I found this."

He reached into his pocket, took out a folded and yellowed bit of paper and handed it through the bars to Lost-Lode Kirby. "That your map, old-timer?"

"Sure is!" Kirby exclaimed. "Sawdell, you dirty—"

Quick as lightning, Cline whipped out a gun. Sweeping it in little arcs to cover the crowd, he backed toward the door, beads of sweat glistening on his face.

"Don't try anything, boys!" he warned.

There was no danger of that. The sheriff and townsmen stood open-mouthed, stunned. But in that moment of paralysis, Fran saw Ray reach through the bars and pluck a .45 from the holster of one of the crowd.

Cline saw that move, too, and swerved his gun toward Ray. And with her breath frozen in her throat, Fran heard the roar of two shots, so closely spaced that they sounded like one.

Cline's bullet plowed into the ceiling—Ray's had already struck the jasper's arm, upsetting his aim and spinning him around by its impact. Through the choking shower of plaster-dust from the ceiling Fran saw Cline pinned to the door-jamb by the weight of a dozen angry men before he could fire again.

When things had quieted down a little, Ray yelled for the sheriff.

"Endicott, are you going to let me out of this cage, or do I have to kiss this gal through the bars?"

Ray was released at once. But it was going to take a court order to get old Trem out, because formal charges had been filed. On the way to the courthouse, Ray suddenly stopped and pulled Fran around to face him.

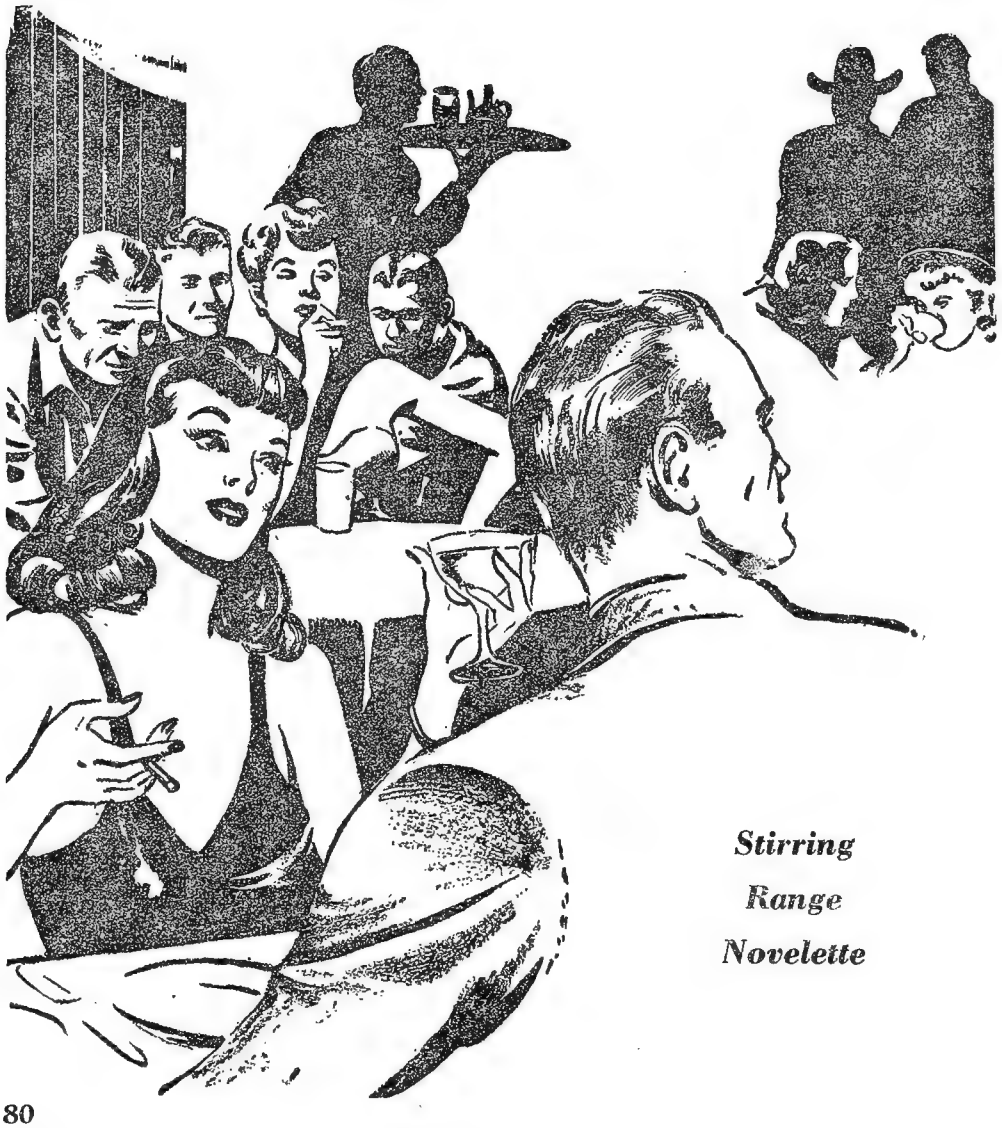
His eyes were solemn. "Little lady," he said. "First I'm gonna propose—and then I'm gonna kiss you."

"It's okay with me," Fran sighed. "Just don't stand back a ways—that's all."

Ray did plumb well with the proposal. And then Fran lifted her face for the kiss that filled her with tingling shivers . . .

THE BRIDE CAME

Delly was the delectable wedding belle who had picked out her groom—but couldn't decide which heart-breakin' hombre was the best man.



Stirring Range Novelette

A-COURTIN'

by Art Lawson

Delly was slow to recognize Jack Simmons — but with him was the most gorgeous girl she had ever seen.

DELLY FRAZER was almost relieved when she was not met at the station, she felt so tired and dusty from the long trip. A hot bath would perk her up; a little rest would make her look more like a bride-to-be, and, since she had been only a little girl when George had seen her last, she wanted to make a specially good impression. But, as she looked over the crowd at the station she thought: He could have sent a message.

A freckle-faced boy was shouting at her: "Help you with your bag, lady?"

"Why—yes," she said, smiling down at him. "Thank you very much. I want to go to the best hotel, please."

"There ain't a hotel, lady," someone spoke up. It was an ancient, bearded man, weighted down by two heavy pistols.

Delly's consternation must have shown in her expression. The man added in a kindly manner, "Didn't you say somebody was going to meet you?"

"But he's not here," she said. "Maybe the telegram didn't arrive. If only—" She glanced over the crowd again. "I'm sure he'll come!"

"Looky here, lady," the old-timer said. "You're a mighty pretty little filly. This

country is short on ladies, especially good looking ones, and that feller's been expecting you a long time. Chances are he got to waiting around a saloon or two and is dead drunk right now. You tell me who he is and I'll sober him up for you. I'm Pete McKee—station-master."

"Oh, George wouldn't drink," she said, confidently. But the man only lifted his heavy eyebrows as if he had never heard of a man who would not bend an elbow on occasion.

"I mean George Polk," she went on. "Mr. George Polk. He's from my home town. We were—I mean—he was going to meet me here."

"Oh, George?" the man said. He asked the boy in an exaggerated tone of deference, "You seen Mr. Polk?"

The kid nodded. He seemed frightened.

"Which saloon's he in?"

"Ain't in any," the boy said.

"Then where on earth is he?" Delly cried.

"Gone!"

"Looky here, kid," the old-timer said. "Where's George at?"

"Yonder." The boy pointed to the blue haze of mountains far off on the western horizon. "He lit out yesterday. Said he was going to California. He stole Jack Simmons' best horse—and—went—"

"That's preposterous," Delly insisted.

A crowd had gathered. There were no women in it at all, and Delly began to feel fear. These men were all staring at her in such a queerly intent manner. No one offered to help her. But one of the men confirmed the boy's statement.

"And that ain't all. If you was to ask me," he said, "George ain't likely to come back."

Delly was afraid that she might break down and cry. The old-timer touched her arm.

"Come along with me, Miss. You can bunk at the Widow Neil's." It was astonishing how soft and assuring his voice was.

Then he bellowed at the boy, "Hop to it, kid. Pick up the lady's bag. And you, Joe," this to one of the pop-eyed crowd, "mind the station while I'm gone."

He led Delly off through the throng of staring, pressing men.

DELLY HATED the widow, a hatchet-faced woman who had nothing good to say about anybody or anything.

"Last one in this room, George Polk, turned out to be a horse-thief," she snapped. "He ran off without paying his board." She glared bitterly at Delly. "See to it you don't entertain no gentlemen in this room. It's fifteen bucks a week—in advance. Supper's at five-thirty—sharp!"

Delly paid the fifteen dollars just to get rid of the woman. She gave the boy with her bag a dollar, and the one who brought her trunk from the station got two. And then she flung herself down on the iron cot. She had thought she would just lie there and cry, but no tears came to her eyes. This was George's room; there was no doubt about it. This was the bed on which George had slept. The rickety desk against the wall was the one on which he had written those letters describing the glories of the West.

Delly lay there, staring at the scarred desk top for many long minutes. She could picture George writing to her, composing those little notes in his precise handwriting.

George had thought he was writing to Delly's older sister, Tess, who never had answered any of his letters. One day, just in the spirit of devilment, Delly had written back in her sister's name, and after this had gone on for some time, she began to believe she had fallen in love with him. So when he proposed that she come out and marry him, Delly had accepted—in her sister's name. It had been a crazy fool thing to do, and actually coming was

crazier yet. But Tess had gotten married to the new doctor, and Delly figured that George would like her just as well once he got used to the idea.

She got up and glanced into the foggy mirror above the commode. She was not as pretty as Tess, maybe. But she knew that her wide blue eyes and long lashes were beautiful. There was just enough curl to her fair hair. Maybe her mouth was a little on the generous side and her nose was too skimpy, and her chin rather girlish. But what did that matter? She had a strong little figure with nice curves. She could ride a horse and had once been on a camping trip. She would make a much better wife for a man in this sort of country than her homebody sister. Delly Frazer did not feel that she had cheated on George.

She tried to remember what he looked like. He was tall—she knew that—but whether he was handsome or not she could not be sure. Possibly she had made it all up to fill her romantic dreams. George Polk—a horse-thief—gone to California!

It was all a cruel joke, a form of western hazing, Delly said to herself as the tears stung her eyes. And just then someone rapped on the door.

"Oh!" Delly was so startled she cried out aloud. "Come in!"

She ran to the door as it opened, and a man stood there on the threshold smiling, holding a wide-brimmed, fawn-colored Stetson hat in his hand. He was tall and just as handsome as she had dreamed . . .

"Tess?"

"Oh—George!"

Delly rushed to him. She flung her arms around his neck and kissed him full on the mouth. She hugged him to her and lifted her feet from the floor. Then she moved her head back to get another look at him. Her guess had been right. That horse-thief story *had* been invented just to torment her.

"George," she said. "I've got something to confess. I'm not Tess. She married the new doctor. I'm her kid sister Delly—remember? I wrote all those letters."

She was quite breathless when she finished, but glad that she had told him all about her deception right at the start. He seemed pleased, too.

"Little Delly—all grown up." His voice did not seem quite right to her. She also thought that George had had brown eyes. But this man's were blue like the far edge of the prairie sky. "Little Delly—and prettier than a pinto colt." He had a wonderful smile. "I knew it all the time, kid. I never did cotton as much to Tess as you would think. How about another kiss?"

His arms were around her. He pressed his lips down on hers and Delly's heart took a great jump. This was better than the dream, than the idle romancing. Wonderful, stirring George. The West sure had made a man of him.

"Break it up, Jack," the landlady's voice suddenly grated. "And you, you hussy—you can get right out onto the street. I told you no entertaining men in this room."

The widow wasted no time. She tossed Delly's bag into the hall, threw her hat after it, and started to push on the trunk. Delly disengaged her lips and looked into the man's blue eyes. He was laughing silently.

"Jack?" she asked.

"Everybody calls me Jack out here," he explained. From the corner of his mouth he said to the landlady, "Relax, ma'am. Little Delly and me are getting hitched first thing in the morning."

"I'll be—" Mrs. Neil exclaimed. "You sure are a speedy worker, Jack Simmons. I thought that girl was the one your no-good friend George Polk who stole your best horse was bringing in from the East. That's what the kid with her bag told me."

"That was her sister, Tess," Jack Simmons said. "This one here is little Delly. She's mine." His smile was absolutely unruffled while he went on with this incredible tale. "Ain't it so, Delly?"

He sighed, and he kissed her again.

"No, it ain't!" Delly tried to say, but her words were muffled by his pressing mouth.

She began to fight. She jabbed a heel into his instep and he released her, hopping around on one foot. The landlady returned to pushing the trunk.

"I thought there was something funny going on," she shrilled. "Jack Simmons, you're no better'n that horse-thief, I reckon."

Delly squared off in front of her, her eyes sparking.

"If you weren't ten times as old as me, you old witch," she shouted, "I'd trim you down to size. As for this drafty old barn—I didn't plan on staying here anyway."

She picked up her hat and bag and strode away down the hall.

JACK SIMMONS followed her, limping along on his injured foot. When he tried to take the bag she slapped his hand away. Outside, she hesitated, glancing up and down the street. Jack Simmons was still dogging her.

"Didn't mean anything, honey," he was telling her. "Just couldn't help it. That pretty mouth was made for kissing, and that little figure was just begging for a hug. I'm afraid I'm going to do it again."

"You better not!" she snapped.

She moved away a couple of paces, and he followed. She hurried along a little faster, and was almost running by the time she reached the station. A sign chalked on a blackboard announced that the next Eastbound train would leave at six A.M. tomorrow. Delly yanked open the waiting room door and slammed it in Jack's face. She was so completely furious she threw down the bag and stamped on the floor before she realized that her behavior was being observed.

A man had been standing by the window watching her. He wore the outfit of a cowboy, with a gun belt and holster strapped around his lean hips.

"She's mad at somebody," he said.

By now Jack Simmons had followed her into the office. "Mad at me," he told the stranger. "She came all the way from Vermont to marry me. So I kissed her. Now she's going back home."

"We can't have that," the other said. "It's against the law for such a pretty girl to go back to Vermont. If it's not, we'll pass a law."

"That's right," Jack said. "Meanwhile, Lew, couldn't you put in a good word for me?"

"Pleased to," the cowboy said. He bowed to Delly who could do nothing but glare at him. He held his big hat over his heart as he talked. "Name is Jack Simmons. Operates the Red Ball Line, horses and trucks, freighting. Weight about one-seventy. Married frequently—has eight children—and a rotten disposition. Drinks and beats his wives. Now, if you're looking for a real catch—"

"Hey!" Jack shouted. "Now—listen here! Those wives—"

"Forgot them," Lew went on without a break. "Those were last month's wives. Now, lady, you surely would not dream of returning to Vermont when you can marry a man like me?"

"Maybe we ought to mention your boss' daughter at this point," Jack Simmons suggested.

"Ah, yes," Lew said. "She eloped with a townsman but we brought her back and the boss detailed me to watch her. But—"

Delly's fury boiled over. She felt fenced in between these men. They were talking as if she were something that could be bought and sold, or traded over the counter like a string of beads. She kicked the cowboy on the shin, pushed him out of

the way, and fled. Wrenching open the first door she saw, she ran through, and right into old Pete McKee, the station-master.

Pete folded her into his big arms. "Beat it, boys," he roared. "Delly's my girl!"

He slammed the door shut on them with a tremendous thud.

CHAPTER TWO

The Cowboy and the Lady

DELLY JUST lay up against the old man's chest and laughed. She was quite hysterical. But she felt safe in here in the small room with the surprisingly tough and tender old-timer. Pete McKee patted her on the back with a big, hard hand; and after a while she brought her laughter under control and became quiet. Pete led her to a chair.

"I'll fetch you a cup of tea," he said. "If those scoundrels bother you again I'll take my blacksnake whip to them."

Old Pete left her for a moment. Delly could hear him outside somewhere, clattering pots and dishes and mumbling through his mustache. She wiped away the tears and blew her nose and was ashamed of herself for letting those two men stampede her. She made a picture of herself handling them with great disdain, the next time they met, the perfect lady rebuffing a pair of hoodlums.

Then Pete was back with the hot tea. He had not asked her any questions, and apparently had no intention of doing so. But Delly thought he deserved an explanation.

"That Jack Simmons kissed me in front of old hatchet-face," she told him. She was surprised that she remembered the kiss with more pleasure than anger, and she was afraid that her scowl was unconvincing. "So the widow kicked me out. She called me a—a hussy!"

"And what did you call her?"

"An old witch!" Delly said. She added, "I tried to think of something more suitable. But—but where I come from, 'witch' is considered pretty strong."

Pete roared. He tossed off the contents of his tea cup.

"You'll do," he said, and she sat up straighter in her chair. Then he asked, "You pulling out tomorrow? You going home?"

"No!" Her answer was instantaneous. "I came out here to marry George Polk—and I'm staying until I find him. George never stole Jack Simmons' horse. Jack Simmons, the hound, invented that story. He and that Lew—"

Pete cleared his throat. "I got to be gettin' to work, Miss. Make yourself to home," he said. "If you stick around maybe I can fix you up with the job of ticket-seller. The last one—uh—well, you might say he absconded with the railroad's funds." He seemed curiously embarrassed. "At least he pulled his stakes, and the funds aren't in the safe."

Pulling stakes seemed to be a habit of people in this town, Delly thought. First of all George—now this agent. Or were they one and the same?

"If you need anything, just set up a holler. Here—" Pete handed her a big Colt pistol. "Shoot this off three times—only don't have it pointing at anybody. You can bunk down in the corner. Ain't nothing to eat in the kitchen, but any saloon in town will give you a handout. Go to the back door. Ladies ain't allowed in the front way."

Delly got to her feet, hesitatingly, holding the pistol at arm's length.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. McKee," she said. "But I couldn't put you out."

"Forget it," he insisted. "And if you need me—well, hell, everybody in town knows where to find me. Sometimes I'm

even here at the depot, if there's a train to be reckoned with."

As he left, he gave her one final bit of advice. "If those two hombres bother you again, shoot them. You won't get hanged for it."

And then he strode out, whistling cheerfully.

Delly sat in the big chair looking at the frightening pistol, sniffing the odors of tobacco and whiskey that filled the room, listening to the growling of her hungry stomach and composing a mental letter to her mother.

It seems that George Polk stole a horse from one Jack Simmons who kissed me and proposed to me. Only I ran away from him. Then a cowboy I met proposed. Then old Pete McKee, the station-master, who's really a darling, made me some tea and said I could bunk in the depot and sell tickets. He gave me a big pistol. There doesn't seem to be a restaurant in town so I'll have to go begging my supper at the back doors of the saloons which line both sides of the main street . . .

Delly had to laugh when she pictured her horrified mother reading that yet unwritten letter. Tess would say that Delly was joking. Pa would call the whole affair ridiculous. The doctor, Delly's new brother-in-law, would say that, as he had suggested all along, no good could come of that child rushing off into the wilderness.

The laugh made her feel much better. It also brought voices from the front room.

"She's not mad any more." That was the cowboy.

"She's forgiven us." That was Jack Simmons. "I'll toss you to see who gets her."

"Fair enough," Lew said.

Delly debated what she should do. She practically had been promised a job here, so it would be within her rights to pick up that pistol and order those men off the property. But after once putting down the Colt, she was not at all sure she wanted to pick it up again. It looked like such a deadly instrument . . . It had plainly been designed to kill men—not game.

Her stomach contracted again with hunger and she suddenly became very bold. The men were discussing who would toss the coin. Delly took out a quarter from her purse and opened the door to the outer room. The men's faces turned toward her. Their expressions were of polite amusement.

"I'll do the tossing," she said. "You can call, Mr. Simmons. After all, I met you first. That should give you a sort of priority."

"Ah!" Jack Simmons said.

"You haven't won—yet!" she reminded him.

Delly tossed the coin, caught it on her left wrist and immediately covered it with her right hand. Jack Simmons was looking to her for a hint. She nodded her head.

"Unfair—unfair!" Lew shouted.

Smugly, Jack Simmons said, "Heads."

Delly glanced under the palm of her hand.

"Tails," she said. Lew whooped. Jack Simmons groaned.

Delly stuck out her chin. "If we're going to get married, cowboy, I want to change to something fresh. What's more, I don't figure on getting hitched on an empty stomach. You willing to wait until I wash up? You willing to buy me a meal? And how about that girl you have to watch?"

"Not at all," Lew said. "I mean—yes, indeed. I can handle everything." He jerked a thumb toward the front door of the station. "Run along, also-ran," he said to Jack.

DELLY TOOK her time. Only the fact that she was faint with hunger kept her from stalling longer. She washed up in the little kitchen, carefully scrubbing off the dust of the long train ride. Then

she dressed in fresh underthings, satin high-heeled sandals, and her only dinner gown. It had a great swirly skirt of deep blue that emphasized her wide eyes, and a tight little bodice that praised the firm, girlish curves. It left her shoulders bare, but the weather was mild enough. Last, she combed out her blond hair until it shone like polished gold.

Finally ready, she opened the door and stepped into the dusty front room of the station. It was quite dark out, and someone had lighted the swinging lamp over the counter. Jack Simmons had left—but Delly's gallant for the evening, the cowboy, was lying sound asleep on a bench with his mouth open. Smiling grimly, she shook him. He promptly jumped to his feet.

"Yes, Mr. Terhune! She won't get away—" he said. "I mean, pardon me, Miss." He smiled wanly. "Miss—uh—" Obviously he had forgotten her name, but she would not help him.

He finally changed his line. "Great jokester, Jack Simmons. Tried to tell me you were the little heiress who was coming out to marry George Polk."

Heiress? she thought. How did that notion get around? "Look—" she asked. "What's George really done?"

"Why—uh—really nothing," Lew said hastily. He seemed embarrassed at having brought it up. He switched swiftly. "Didn't you mention eating? Lord, girl, but you're gorgeous."

He had finally wakened up. His eyes admired hers, and they admired her mouth and the way her gown hugged her figure. He leaned forward to kiss her caressingly, briefly, on the tip of her bare shoulder. Then he closed his eyes tightly and shuddered.

"I can't stand it!" he said. "Let's go."

Taking her arm, he hurried her out. There was a cool spot on her skin where his lips had touched her shoulder. She was becoming confused again. George marrying an heiress? Lew must have been teasing her. But he had seemed completely sincere. Maybe George Polk had not been up to any good, after all . . .

She was aware of Lew's hand on her arm as he walked along with the rolling gait of a man at home on horseback. She was glad that she had cheated at the coin tossing to get him as her escort tonight. His kiss had been a gentleman's tribute to a lady's beauty—while Jack Simmons' impetuous caresses were brazenly stolen goods. Going out with this handsome cowboy would spite that quick-to-kiss freighter.

She swayed slightly against her companion as she realized that she did not even know his full name. Though he hurried along, practically dragging her after him, she wanted to take it easy, to see every new thing in the soft spring night. The rattle of spurs . . . the pound of booted heels . . . the strange language everyone so jocularly shouted to each other . . . the smells of horses and stale beer and dust . . . the way all the men turned completely around to stare when she passed and went on in silent awe after she had gone . . . Delly wanted to savor each new sight and sensation in this strange town.

But Lew did not give her a chance. After passing what appeared to be the biggest and fanciest café in town he ducked down a side alley. A dimly lighted sign over a door stated: FAMILY ENTRANCE.

Delly balked. Was this what old McKee meant about begging at the back door? But Lew reassured her. He opened up the door and she stepped inside. After a small lobby a brilliantly lighted room shone with clear glass, white tablecloths and polished silver. Delly had not expected anything like this. As a waiter led them to a table, she saw that there were many other women among the diners.

And then she noticed that a man was grinning insolently at her. Slicked up as he was, and without his fawn-colored

Stetson, Delly was slow to recognize Jack Simmons. But with him was the most gorgeous girl she had ever seen, a statuesque redhead with translucent, white skin.

"There's Jack Simmons with one of his wives," Delly said to Lew.

The cowboy glanced around briefly. He started. When he turned back, Delly thought she saw pure hatred in his eyes. She imagined that was what a man looked like when contemplating murder . . .

Lew quickly recovered himself. "Charming couple, aren't they?" he said.

FROM THEN on, all the fun was gone from the evening. Lew's manner became stiff. He seemed to have forgotten Delly. When she asked him questions he answered offhandedly.

"Everybody's been acting so funny about George Polk," she said in desperation. "Why won't anybody tell me just what he did? From what Pete McKee hinted, he robbed the railroad. Old hatchet-faced Widow Neil said George stole Jack's best horse. You started to say something else about him, then suddenly shut up." She ran her tongue across her lips to moisten them. "And where did you get the idea that I was an heiress?"

"Rumor," he said casually. "You know how it is. A man's going to marry a girl—Well—he wouldn't marry any old girl who happened by. She's the most beautiful girl in the world. Or she has the biggest, roundest eyes. Or she's rich. It's always that way. I don't know how those rumors start."

"You do so," she insisted. "Especially that one about me being an heiress."

Lew was signalling the waiter. Delly knew that he hadn't told her the whole story, but there seemed little chance that she would get any more from him. The old anger was surging up again within her. But her escort ordered a bottle of champagne and poured her a drink. She had never tasted the stuff before, and was in no hurry to do so now.

Lew clinked his glass against hers.

"To love in the springtime," he said. "To beauty, honor and fidelity."

Delly joined in this strange toast. The wine tasted good. It seemed to warm her and exhilarate her at the same time. She looked up and found herself looking straight into the green eyes of the redheaded girl.

Jack Simmons' "wife" glanced away immediately. But Delly had the feeling that the redhead had been studying her. A slow blush spread down her cheeks. The other girl was talking with false animation now, throwing her quick words at Jack Simmons.

Delly glanced back at Lew, a secret smile radiating from her lips. But the waiter was bringing on the main course now, and Delly was so famished she could think of nothing but eating. The steak was two inches thick and the potatoes fried to a crisp. The coffee served with it was strong enough to stand up without a cup.

"That's the way they like it out here," Lew told her. "You'll get used to it. I remember when I first came out here . . ."

Jack Simmons had ordered champagne, too, as if to show that he wasn't to be outdone. The redhead sipped with perfect aplomb. Though Lew was still telling of his first week at the ranch, Delly distinctly heard Jack Simmons' toast.

"To George Polk," he said. "What a man!"

The redhead choked on her champagne. Jack Simmons retained his perfect smiling dead pan. If he knew that Delly was looking at him and had heard his toast, he showed no sign of it. But Delly believed she had suddenly found out where she could get the answers to the questions that bothered her. Lew was eyeing her curiously.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "You

weren't listening to what I was saying."

"Of course I was," Delly insisted. "You were telling me about your first week here." He had said something about his boss, but she had not the slightest idea what it was. She repeated the words. "About your boss, Mr. Terhune—and it was very interesting."

The red-headed girl laughed merrily. Lew pushed back his chair.

"This place is getting crowded," he said. "Come on."

CHAPTER THREE

Meeting by Moonlight

THIS TIME he walked slowly, so that she was able to take in all the sights of the main block of the town's single street. Every other building was a saloon. They bore huge signs. TEN PRETTY GIRLS FROM OLD NEW ORLEANS . . . OUR WHISKEY GUARANTEED GEN-YOU-WINE . . . OUR TABLES ARE SQUARE . . .

There was a saddle shop and a little drugstore. Henry's Tonsorial Parlor was running full blast, both chairs occupied by men with lathered chins. There was a general store, and suddenly they were passing the office of the Red Ball Line that Delly remembered was owned by Jack Simmons. The livery stable was next, and beyond it, the station, which was Delly's home for now.

The night was balmy and full of stars, and Lew suddenly became romantic.

"I could hire a real Western-style rig." he suggested, "and ride up the bluff over the river. Up there you can see my ranch —and the lights of town."

The recklessness that had caused Delly to come out and toss the coin that had made the cowboy her escort for the night was still with her.

"Why not?" she said. "I'd love it!" And that would spite Jack Simmons some more, she thought.

"Wait here."

He ducked into the livery stable. Excitement was gathering in Delly's breast, spreading warmly through her, lifting the throb of her pulse. Glancing down the street, she saw Jack Simmons and the red-headed girl come out of the alley way. They looked about, but could not have seen her in the shadows. After a moment of indecision they moved off in the other direction.

Lew was leading out a buckboard to which two horses were hitched. A robe was thrown over the seat. Gallantly, like a well-established suitor, the cowboy gave Delly a hand up. Then he swung to the seat and carefully tucked the robe around their legs though the night was hardly cold enough for it. He picked up the reins, and they were off.

The horses were fresh and eager for a run. They trotted smartly out of town, down toward the ford across the river, then, without taking it, turned into a winding road that lifted up the long slope of a not-so-high hill. At the top the horses turned right and stopped, and it was as if they had come this way often before. Like horses on a milk route they knew exactly where to go.

Delly laughed. "I'm not the first girl you've brought up here," she chided.

He was uneasy, not prepared for joking. Yonder, across the water, Becky could make out the dark rectangles of the ranch-houses. Lew helpfully pointed out the shadowy buildings and other features.

"That's the corral—there's the stables —and at the far end is where the hands bunk. The largest building, with all the lights burning, is the main house. The boss is waiting for his daughter to come home, I suppose." His tone was bitter.

Delly said swiftly, "That red-headed

girl in the restaurant—is she the one?"

"Jane Terhune," he said, still bitterly. "Old Man Terhune's pride and joy."

His mouth was grim. There was a rattle of hoofs below and two horses bearing riders splashed into the ford. A girl's laughter drifted up to the bluff as they hesitated a moment. Then the riders went on toward the ranch.

"She's the one Jack Simmons said was your girl—the one you're supposed to be watching?"

Lew's eyes were intent. Then he laughed. "Oh sure—my girl. Like the wives. Jack isn't married. It's just a standard joke. Every bachelor cowpoke is supposed to be in love with the boss' daughter."

He leaned toward Delly. The moon had come out from behind its cloud screen, and the silver light revealed the clear glow of her skin. "You're too damn lovely for George Polk—" he said.

And he kissed her.

THOUGH SHE was not exactly swept off her feet, Delly did not mind that kiss. The men out in this country seemed to need a little extra loving once in a while. She guessed she needed a little too, after her hard trip from the East and her long day of frustrations. So she put her arms up around his neck and pressed her lips to his.

Lew held her closer, and he was not making fun of her as he kissed her, as Jack Simmons had done. There was a lot of comfort in his embrace. After a while she moved her lips away from his and lay with her head against his chest. Her eyes closed. She felt him bending over her, and his mouth seeking hers again, and she turned up her face to his just enough so their lips met again.

But now there seemed to be something lacking, and, curiously, she thought of Jack Simmons taking her into his arms just as if she were his real sweetheart. She remembered how she had clung to him—and her pulses took a sudden leap.

Abruptly, Lew held her away. He was looking far off into the night and the endless sky over the rangeland.

"It's no use," he said. "We're both in love—but not with each other. I'm sorry."

"I'm not," she said. She laid her cheek against his and looked up at the stars too. "I'm not sorry—and I'm not in love. It's a funny thing, cowboy, I don't even know your full name, but coming up here with you did something for me. It sort of set me free. You can kiss me again, and then take me home—I mean back to the station."

He looked down into her eyes. "You're the loveliest girl I've ever met," he said. "Maybe if you were the first, as well—"

"It is that redhead then?" she said. "It really is the boss' daughter?"

He did not answer, but that was no longer necessary. The whole story was too plain on his face.

"Down in the restaurant—the way she was acting," Delly went on, "I don't think she has so big a yen for Jack Simmons. She was burning her torch for someone else."

"Of course," he said gloomily. "I thought you knew. Didn't Jack tell you about this man she ran off with?"

"Jack never told me anything," she said with some heat.

Lew's bitter laugh was back. "You asked for it," he said. "She ran off with George Polk. My gal—your man—" His lips had thinned. "And the sour note is—" He said it slowly, as if he were a judge pronouncing the death sentence, "I never knew she was the girl I wanted until she did run away."

"*George*?" Delly cried.

"Sure . . . she ran away with him. Yesterday. But her horse threw her and we got her back. George is still hiding out somewhere. Jane's old man, the boss, detailed me to keep her from running away

again. It's driving me crazy. So when you won me tonight by tossing that coin I asked Jack to do me the favor of keeping his eye on her."

George Polk was certainly keeping himself occupied, Delly mused.

"Jane Terhune's sure a luscious item," she said wistfully.

Lew laughed, as if the confession had lightened the load he had been carrying.

"What's George Polk got that I haven't?" he asked.

"George hasn't got anything—anything at all," she assured him. She threw her arms around him and gave him a big, bright kiss. "Now, let's go on home, cowboy."

LEW LEFT her at the station. A light burned inside, and Delly wondered if old Pete McKee had come back. She pressed her lips warmly to Lew's for a moment after making him promise to come and see her again. The she slipped into the station.

The faintest odor of an exotic perfume mingled with the stronger smell of tobacco smoke to greet her. So she was not at all surprised to find Jane Terhune in the back room, sitting in the big chair and smoking a long Mexican cigarette. She jumped to her feet when Delly closed the door.

"You keep away from him," she ordered.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Delly said cheerfully. "I don't want him any more. You can have him, lock, stock and barrel."

Jane Terhune was even lovelier here in old Pete McKee's room than she had been in the restaurant. Her gown enhanced the naturally full curves of her figure, and the dim light softened the brilliance of her red hair and green eyes. Even in her anger she was wholly feminine, and Delly could easily understand how the boss' daughter could break the hearts of all the ranch hands. Why, a girl like this was more dangerous than a whole army of rustlers.

But it was also apparent to Delly that Jane did not trust her in the least. She was accustomed to having a free hand with her men, and did not know how to handle competition. This made her a little unsure of herself now. It caused her to be angry, when ordinarily Delly knew, she would have been cool and superior to any other female.

Jane said sharply, "I'll make a deal with you, sister. You stay away from my man, and I'll stay away from yours."

Delly was bone-tired. She wished Jane Terhune would go away and let her sleep. She would willingly have agreed to just about anything.

"Okay," Delly said. "It's a deal."

The redhead shrugged her shoulders. She rubbed out her old cigarette on the window sill and lighted a fresh one. It glowed cherry at the tip, and her eyes gleamed with a green fire. She paced across the room and back.

Delly threw herself into the big chair. Evidently, Jane Terhune, tasting victory, was becoming arrogant.

"One thing you better remember," she said. "I'm giving you more than you're giving me. Just keep that in mind. George tried to elope with me. George would have done anything to get me, especially after your telegram came. He had been gambling too much and had gotten into debt. He borrowed money by claiming he was going to marry an heiress. Everyone knew you were writing to him. Then that telegram came, saying you were on the way. And sister, he couldn't even remember what you looked like—"

A red-hot fury was sweeping through Delly Frazer. She gripped the arms of the chair until her muscles ached and her knuckles turned white. When she spoke, she barely managed to hold her voice in a vise of self-control.

"I sure appreciate you telling me that."

"Think nothing of it." the redhead said.

"It's free. Now that we see eye to eye, I better be getting back to my jail. My old man locked me in my room. So I had to climb out a window and cross that damned river in these fancy clothes. You ever try doing that?"

"No," Delly said. "Not yet."

Airily, Jane Terhune blew smoke at the ceiling. "I'll let you in on a secret, sister. George is hiding up in Antelope Canyon waiting for me to come back. I wish I could see his face when you turn up instead."

Delly leaped up. She had taken her limit from this redhead.

"You'll have that chance," she snapped. "You're going to be there. And I'm going to make him decide who he wants—in front of both of us!"

"No, *Ma'am*," Jane said. "My little scheme didn't work. I only ran away with George to make Lew jealous. I let my horse go so Lew could catch me. But I suppose I'll have to try something else. He and Jack Simmons are the only two men I know who wouldn't lie down and die for me."

For a moment, Delly was bewildered. "Lew?" she repeated.

"Of course, stupid, Lew Parkman. We made a trade—remember? You promised to leave him alone—"

BUT DELLY was stalking the other girl, and the redhead, in sudden terror, backed up until she struck the wall. She opened her mouth to scream, but Delly's palm slapped down hard, ringing like a whip-lash in the confined space of the small room. Jane Terhune lost her voice when Delly slapped her a second time. Three good blows, and then the redhead began to fight back . . .

It was like battling a cat. Jane fought with a hissing fury, her green eyes like molten emeralds. And Delly was driven by a pure, overwhelming fury that washed out all the weariness of this endless, baffling day. She kicked and scratched and used her fists. When Jane got a clinch on Delly and twisted her arm, the Eastern girl applied some quick-thinking *judo*, and both tumbled onto the floor.

Delly landed on top—good and hard—and with both hands full of the gorgeous red hair, made as if to bang Jane's head against the planks. The pride of the Terhune ranch surrendered.

"The man's crazy in love with you," Delly gasped. "You ought to be ashamed. But you're just the sort who would think of eloping with one man to make another man chase you. And it worked, this time. I mean Lew. Up there on the bluff all he could talk about was you." The suspicious green eyes widened. "Only he thinks you ran away with George because you really preferred George. He doesn't know it was a trick."

Delly was on the verge of crying. She untangled herself from the redhead and stood up. Jane's whole face had softened strangely. She got off the floor and, standing beside Delly, gently touched her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Miss Frazer, really," she said. "I'm sorry as the devil. I didn't mean that about George. He's just—well—I didn't mean it. The livery boy told me you had gone riding with Lew, and—well, I was so furious I didn't know what I was saying."

"Go away!" Delly cried. "Go on home. Climb back into your old window before your father finds out you're gone and fires Lew. Go on! Get out!"

The contrite redhead moved toward the back door. "It was big of you to tell me what Lew said—"

Delly had reached the end of her rope. All her energy had been put into that brief fight. She stumbled across the room and pushed the other girl out the door. For a while she leaned against the casing, too weary to move back into the room. Silently, Jane vanished down the alley, but,

as Delly still slumped there, the whispering of men came to her.

She turned off the lamp and crouched by the window to peer into the gloom. A man swore. She recognized the timbre of it. Her present host, old Pete McKee, was somewhere out there.

"She's headin' back for the ranch now. Come on, Jack—let's get a drink."

Then Delly spotted him. He was across the alley, standing in the shadows. Probably he had been there all evening spying on her. A second figure broke from the shadows. That would be Jack Simmons. Both men had been in a position to witness her battle royal with Jane Terhune.

The two moved up the alley, out of hearing and out of sight.

CHAPTER FOUR

Where's My Man?

BECKY DID not know that she slept. She was having a wild dream. Jack Simmons ona big black horse swept down the street and captured her. She dreamed that he lifted her to the saddle and kissed her, and that they were caught in a blizzard and were freezing to death. Then she woke, shivery with the cold. Someone was tapping on the door.

"Time to get up, Miss," came Pete McKee's voice. "The train's due in half an hour."

"But I'm not going," she called out. "I came here to marry George Polk—and I'm sure going to make a try at it."

Old McKee must have known very well that she did not intend leaving today.

"You might as well forget George," he told her now. "He ain't coming back."

"Then I'll go out and find him," she said.

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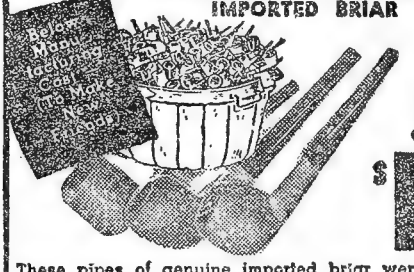

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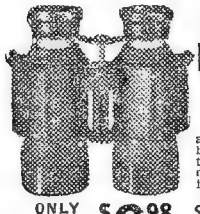

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"Nothin' more mule-headed than a woman—especially a young one hunting a man," Pete said. "Well, take it easy." He retreated hurriedly. Delly put on her riding clothes, then went into the little kitchen and made herself a cup of hot coffee. She was just beginning to enjoy it when there was a great clatter in the waiting room and again, a fist pounded on the door.

She opened up a crack to peer out, and there was Jack Simmons with her trunk on his shoulder.

"Brought this from the widow's," he said. "Heard you were going back East today. All for the best, I reckon. Where you want your trunk?"

She stepped aside. "In here," she said. "But I'm sticking around. I came out here to get married, and by heck, I'm going to. I got my man all picked out, and my loop ready to dab on him. Is that the way you put it in this country?"

"You're learning awful fast," he said, admiringly. Gently he set the trunk where she had pointed. "Only—you got to find him first," he suggested.

She wrinkled her nose at him.

"I have," she said.

"Where?" he asked.

But Delly only laughed at him. She was playing this now like a game of checkers. Yesterday she had been all confusion. But today she knew just what moves she would make, and she would take her chance on the opposition. She was playing for keeps, and the stake might very well be heartbreak.

After he had gone, she put on her hat, got her riding crop from the trunk, and went down to the livery stable. Even though every man in town openly gaped at her, she had the odd sensation that she was being observed by unseen persons as well. At the barn she picked out a lively-looking horse, and asked the stable man if he knew where Antelope Canyon was.

"Can't miss it," he said, and told her how to find it.

Delly was in a hurry now. She turned right on the dusty road and kicked her heels into the horse's ribs. When the road began to climb and took a bend around a low bluff she halted a moment to blow the horse and look back over her trail. Two riders were just leaving town—keeping to the side of the road where they would not be very conspicuous. Over toward the Terhune ranch a small group of horsemen had just started down toward the ford.

She kicked her horse into a run.

Everybody was hunting George Polk—but Delly figured on getting there first.

THIS MUST be Antelope Canyon Delly recognized it by the landmarks that the livery stableman had described to her. She turned left, riding into it at a fast trot, following the narrow trail alongside the deep little stream. Jane had said that George was up here waiting . . .

"Jane?"

"George!" Delly cried. She turned toward the voice.

The silence was bigger than the canyon as Delly stepped down from the saddle.

"Where are you, George?" she asked.

"Beat it," he said finally. "Look, kid, I was only joking in those letters. Go on back home."

Firmly she said. "You're joking now, George."

"I got another girl," he said. A sudden fear hit his voice. "How'd you know where to find me?"

"Jane told me," Delly said innocently. "She's marrying Lew Parkman. She must have told him, too. At least, he's riding out here with a whole bunch of men. I came to warn you—"

Again there was no sound in the canyon. Then George came cautiously from the brush, holding a rifle before him, looking

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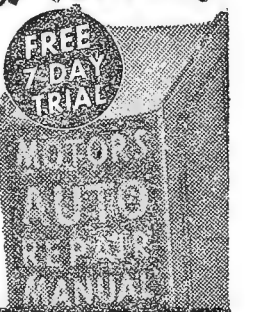

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right and left. He seemed scared stiff.

He said, "There aren't any men coming after me. They tried to find me before and couldn't—"

He cocked an ear, listening. He could stand a shave and a square meal, Delly thought, suddenly very sorry for him.

"I came all the way out here to marry you, George," she said in a clear, strong voice loud enough for any audience to hear. "But I guess I can't, now. I cheated on you. I'm Tess' kid sister. She married a doctor—and I've got another man all picked out. If you'll give me back the money you stole from the railroad, and Jack Simmons' horse, I'll hold them up here while you get away."

"You're lying," George snapped. "They sent you out here to help trap me."

George was like a caged animal. He was a little berserk. A pebble rattled down the slope and a blued rifle poked its snout over the edge of the big rock behind which he had hidden himself. Delly was between him and the weapon.

"I got you under my sights," Jack Simmons said coldly. "Drop that gun, George."

INSTEAD, THE cornered man grabbed Delly for a shield. Instantly, Jack dropped his gun and dove over the top of the big rock, straight down onto George Polk. Delly managed to squirm away somehow, and the two men pitched into a bitter battle.

But in another few minutes, Old Pete came around the corner of the boulder carrying his big pistols. Jack smashed George into the brush and disarmed him.

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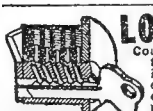

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Then he hauled the frightened man to his feet.

"Where's my horse?" he asked. "Where's the money you took from the railroad?"

George nodded dumbly toward a sort of cave away from the trail.

Delly was empty and spent. She had been afraid of this, afraid that Jack Simmons had followed only to get back his horse. She bit at her lower lip to help maintain her composure.

"Drift," Jack Simmons said to George. "Delly wasn't lying. Those men from the Terhune spread will be here in a couple of minutes."

George started slowly, then leaped into the saddle of the livery stable horse and spurred up the canyon. He never once looked back.

Delly turned wide eyes to Jack Simmons. His smile was warm, and there was a bit of the devil in it, too; just as there had been the day when she first met him.

"I don't know who this feller is you got picked out for your man," he said. "But I've been putting my mind to the same problem and have a candidate of my own. Me . . . if you'll have me."

She fell into his arms. And when he kissed her, then she knew—as she should have known from the first moment—that he had been destined for her. The whole world swept dizzily around them, and her lips were soft and inviting under the firmness of his.

"*Have* you?" she whispered. "I've—got you."

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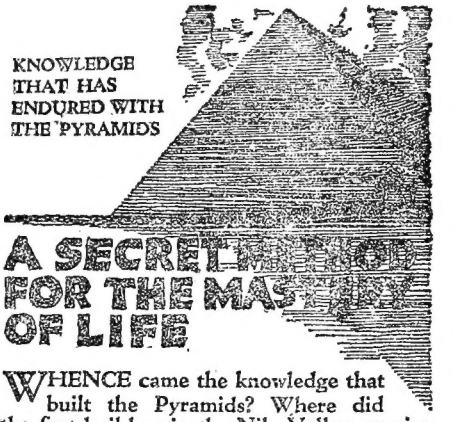

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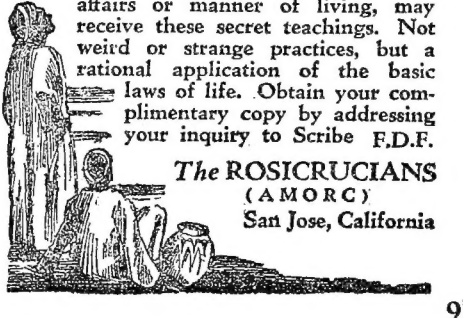

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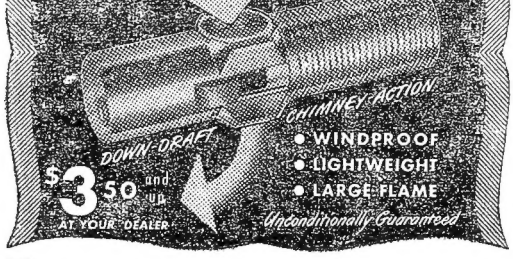

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(Continued from page 68)

monica tricks. Salty makes his harmonica imitate a baby so well, you'll have trouble believing it's not a real live baby. The other side features Salty doing a different version of the old railroad song, *John Henry,* and with his Brown Country Boys, he gets off some hot instrumental licks.

Chet Aikens

The popular Chet Aikens of Victor fame comes up with two that I think you'll like. This first number is the perfect vehicle for Chet and his famed guitar, and it could well be Chet's theme song. In *My Guitar Is My Sweetheart,* he gets off some lively strumming on this spirited ditty which tells of his love for his "stringed sweetheart." The flipover is an unusual combination of some terrific barrelhouse rhythms and rustic strings.

Bob Wills

When Bob Wills, formerly a Columbia artist, switched to the MGM label, he really boosted MGM's rating in the folk music field. His first record for MGM a few months ago, is currently on the best-seller lists of any number of national polls. You probably have it yourself—*Bubbles in My Beer.* This new release promises to achieve the same popularity. You'll be taking off your Stetson to these two solid Wills originals, for they're terrific. *Closed for Repairs* is a story of broken-hearted love, introduced in Bob's unique style and sung by smooth-tonsilled Tommy Duncan who is joined by the harmonious Playboys. You'll like the modern dance tempo arrangement sparked by Les Anderson's rhythm guitar and Bob's violin. *Little Cowboy Lullaby* is a tender, melodious song, done in an easy, lilting style.

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